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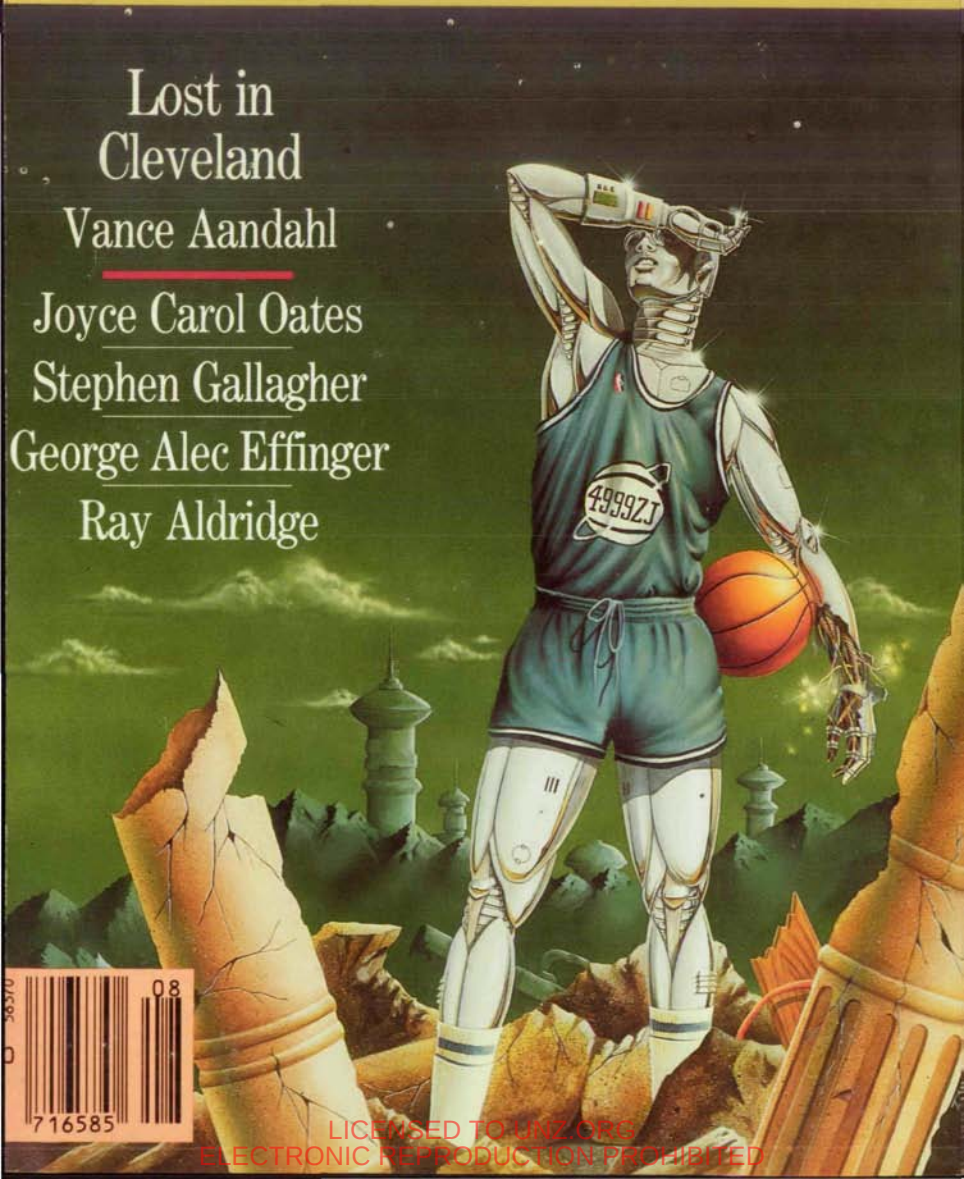

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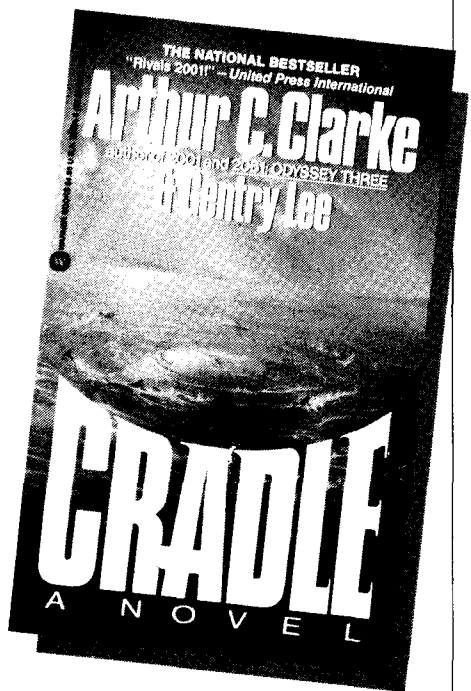

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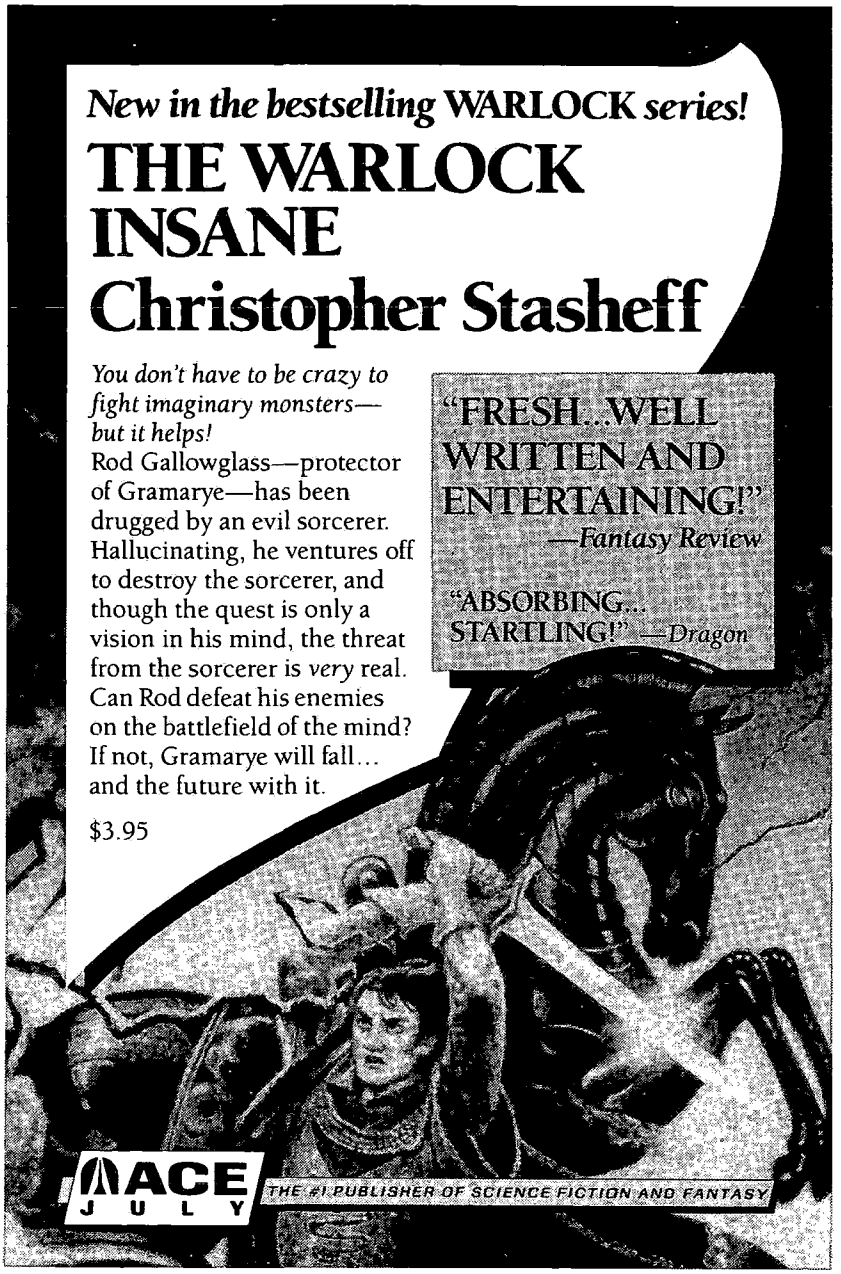

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NOVELETS

A WORLD WAITING	36	**Sheila Finch**
RIBBON OF DARKNESS, OVER ME	101	**Stephen Gallagher**
IRRESISTIBLE	142	**George Alec Effinger**

SHORT STORIES

THE DAMNATION OF A— K—	6	**Joyce Carol Oates**
ESPREE	58	**Renato Pestriniero**
CHUMP CHANGE	67	**Ray Aldridge**
THE ARTIST OF THE FUTURE	73	**Robert Onopa**
LOST IN CLEVELAND	87	**Vance Aandahl**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS	26	**Algis Budrys**
BOOKS TO LOOK FOR	32	**Orson Scott Card**
SCIENCE: *Long Ago and Far Away*	132	**Isaac Asimov**

CARTOONS: MARC BILGREY (24), S. HARRIS (57), NURIT KARLIN (86)

COVER BY TERRY SMITH FOR "LOST IN CLEVELAND"

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The Damnation of A—— K——

Joyce Carol Oates

TO HIS EMBARRASSMENT and chagrin, Amos Kingsley was becoming a celebrity of sorts, though *that* hadn't been his intention. He had been desperate to change his life; he was, after all, still in the prime of life — or nearly; fifty-three years old on the very day he told his wife they must separate. *Though, as everyone insisted, he looked much younger.* And now, scarcely a year later, a delirious year later, he had become so famous locally, people stared at him in the village, and smiled apologetically if he glanced up, annoyed: for his privacy *was* being invaded. And yet—

He was flattered; he was exhilarated. After all, as he told his somewhat melancholy reflection in the mirror, he was only human. And it was an excellent way of assuaging loneliness.

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Invitations to dinner parties, cocktail parties, receptions — mainly from people outside the social circle to which he and his former wife had belonged. Invitations to lecture, to participate on panels. Invitations to women's clubs across the state. And requests for interviews: Amos hadn't known there were so many "media outlets" for interviews, since, for years, he had limited his reading to the *New York Times*, two or three semi-popular magazines, and a slew of professional journals. Evidently there existed an enormous maw of sorts, insatiable for news, for "personalities," and he had one morning woken to find himself in demand: no longer the anonymous Amos Kingsley, but the controversial and provocative "Amos Kingsley." Of course it was embarrassing, but it *was* flattering. And neither Amos could resist.

Interviews — at first he had been a reluctant participant, clearing his throat nervously, stammering and falling silent, even when he knew perfectly well what he wanted to say; even on television. (Amos had been interviewed for three vertiginous minutes on an early-morning "talk" show in New York City; and for a painfully long half hour on a New Jersey Network "arts forum.") With the passage of time, however, he acquired a certain conversational style, alternately diffident and brazen, and frequently quite witty indeed: and being interviewed, even by fools, became less of a hazardous ordeal and more of a sport. And it *was* the most efficacious way of dealing with loneliness, as Amos quickly learned.

So it was, he began accepting every request for an interview that came his way. On a Saturday morning in September, for instance, he was interviewed by a woman reporter for the *Trenton Tribune*; the following Tuesday, by the moderator of a Newark radio program; and three days later, by a high school sophomore named Billy Hendrie who had a column — "Diogenes in Search," as he informed Amos — in his school newspaper. "It's a somewhat controversial column," he said. Billy came to Amos's house late Friday afternoon with a computer printout of questions and a Sony tape recorder. He was a fragile-looking boy of moderate height with a head of pale bristling blond curls and startled blue eyes and downy cheeks that were permanently flushed, as if windburned: the sort of boy, Amos thought, who belongs in an Episcopalian boys' choir, shyly resplendent in an ankle-length velvet robe. On the telephone, Billy Hendrie had sounded awkward and tentative, but in person he appeared to be more composed, and Amos wondered uneasily whether the interview might be a mistake.

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(When his own son had been fourteen or fifteen, Amos had never known whether the boy was telling the truth clumsily, or lying skillfully; and now that his son was twenty-five years old, and working for the Justice Department in Washington, he still couldn't tell. But they spoke together so rarely, perhaps it didn't matter.)

Amos invited Billy Hendrie into his study and offered him a glass of sherry — it was past five o'clock, after all. The boy hesitated before accepting, then said, "Thank you, sir," in a grave voice. When he drank, a faint crimson mustache appeared on his upper lip, as if he'd been kissed by a voracious lipsticked female.

Amos settled into his leather swivel chair while Billy read off his questions in a slow, flat voice. Hadn't this all taken place previously? Hadn't every question been put to Amos Kingsley, though his "celebrity" was only a few months old —? However, Amos sipped at his sherry and answered the questions one by one, in no hurry to be finished, for when he *was* finished, when Billy Hendrie asked his final question, and the spinning cassettes were stilled, there was the evening to be gotten through; and the night; and since he invariably woke at three or four in the morning, there were the hellish hours before the dawn as well.

Billy fussed with his tape recorder while Amos delivered his fastidious, impeccably balanced sentences, not meaning, perhaps, to be rude (for clearly he couldn't be listening): then looked up in boyish chagrin and told Amos that the mechanism wasn't functioning correctly — and hadn't been recording all along.

"You mean — everything I've said is lost? *Everything!*" Amos asked, absurdly hurt.

"I'm afraid so, sir," Billy said. The attractive rosy flush on his cheeks deepened; for a long awkward moment, he continued to fuss with the machine, turning dials, poking and prodding with his forefinger, as if not daring to look up. (For, indeed, Amos was choked with a sudden uncharacteristic fury and didn't trust himself to speak.) Then Billy glanced up slyly — his thick-lashed blue gaze *was* remarkably coy — and said: "Well — should I draw your bath for you, sir?"

Amos stared at him and asked him to repeat himself.

"Your bath, sir, Mr. Kingsley, sir — isn't it time for your bath?" Billy Hendrie asked.

So they went upstairs.

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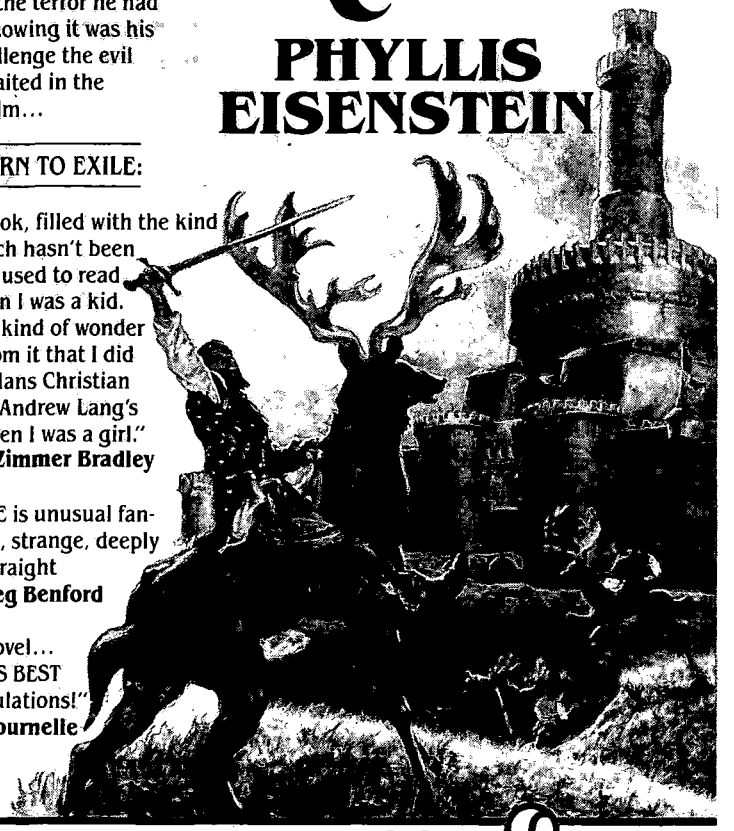

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The keen-eyed lad discovered a box of "Evergreen Mist" bubble bath beneath the sink, with the scouring pads and toilet crystals; and though it had belonged to Amos's wife, he didn't protest as Billy shook it gaily into the hot, splashing water. Within a few minutes the bathroom was steamy and pungent with the scent of evergreen. "Let me assist you, sir," Billy said, helping Amos pull his velour shirt off over his head: for, in his excitement, Amos had knocked his glasses askew and was stumbling about blindly. He had unexpected difficulty getting his trousers off as well, and his tight-fitting cotton shorts. . . .

(Amos Kingsley was astounded that his body, which no one had contemplated for decades, should appear now, in the perfumy warmth of the bathroom, so much to advantage. It was true, he had a small paunch; and yellowish fatty thighs; and his chest was slightly concave; and the skin was pale and blotched. Even so, he knew himself an adequate physical specimen for his age, for a man of the intellect *who had no pretensions of being a muscle man.* There was something appealing about the silvery white hairs that covered his legs and curled thinly about his groin; there was something noble — for didn't Billy's gaze suggest it? —about the mere brave fact of nakedness in a gentleman of fifty-four.)

Sucking in his breath, Amos clung to the boy's proffered arm, and stepped gingerly into the tub, settled, shivering, fairly trembling, into the hot, sudsy water. Bubbles rose greenly and popped about his head; the very air had turned intoxicating. Billy took up the stiff old sponge, and soaped it thoroughly, and began to lather Amos's back with a rough, boyish vigor. Before Amos could protest, he lathered his chest as well, and his neck, and his head, and even his ears — poking into his ears so that Amos shuddered and jerked about helplessly, splashing water out of the tub. A powerful tickling sensation ran through his body. He protested that such solicitude was unnecessary — he could certainly bathe himself — but Billy ignored him.

By degrees the boy's manner had become brusque and overbearing. He squeezed shampoo onto his fingers, and soaped Amos's thin, lank hair, and massaged his skull, so roughly that Amos whimpered aloud. "You're hurting me — please — this isn't necessary," Amos said.

Billy's response was prankish: he pushed Amos's head beneath the water as if to silence him: and Amos fought feebly, and gasped in surprise. What was happening! Was he going to be drowned in his own bathtub!

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Seeing how the poor man choked and sputtered, Billy playfully pushed his head down again, and did not release it for several terrible seconds. Amos swallowed bathwater, and choked, and gasped for air, and thrashed about in the tub. He tried to grab hold of the boy's wrists, but they were too soapy to be caught.

Was he going to be drowned —? The lad clearly did not know his strength; or was careless of it. Or interpreted Amos's feeble desperation as mere playfulness. Pushed down into the water yet again by Billy's cruel hands, poor Amos saw his white toes surfacing, a very long distance away, and his shriveled little penis, bobbing like a water-bloated sausage.

"*Help! — someone please help!*" Amos tried to shout: but his words were garbled by the bathwater. And, in any case, who would come to help him? — they had all gone away.

Amos woke to find his legs tangled in an afghan quilt. His head ached; his mouth was parched — so dry he could barely force himself to swallow. For a long, dazed minute, he couldn't figure out where he was. On the divan in his study, and not in his bed? — there must have been a reason for him to have come down here. But he couldn't remember.

Later that morning he saw in his appointment book that, at five o'clock, he was scheduled for an interview with "B. Hendrie," a student from the local high school who had telephoned him a few days before. He felt uneasy about keeping the appointment — he didn't know why, unless because he'd been interviewed so much lately — but he supposed he was obliged to go through with it. Otherwise, a slow afternoon. A long, slow, lonely evening.

AMOS KINGSLEY had become "Amos Kingsley," about whom rumors circulated. It flattered him that people talked about him — he was only human, after all — but sometimes he worried that they fabricated tales, or lied outright. He knew himself disliked because of what had happened to his wife. He knew himself envied and resented because of the modicum of public success that had come his way. For he was surrounded, it seemed, by small-minded, spiteful people.

For years he had been a lawyer with a private practice; he had been involved in state politics — he was an old friend of the governor's and had

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advised him frequently on matters of policy; he had worked hard, for very little reward, on several books dealing with little-known but highly significant subjects in American history. (His six-hundred-page study of New Jersey party politics in the era of Woodrow Wilson had been favorably reviewed in professional journals; his analysis of the role of law in the early Republic had been praised in the *New York Times* for its "faultless research," and its author's "sound, if guarded, judgement.") Slowly, excruciatingly slowly, Amos Kingsley had acquired a reputation as an excellent amateur historian in his field . . . doomed by the tacit consensus of his academic colleagues as "amateur" because he did not teach at any university. His books *were* completely respectable, his methodology and presentation entirely scholarly, his prose style forthright and serviceable: and yet — and it was always "and yet" — wasn't the man simply an amateur, a dabbler, not to be taken seriously? Amos had never told anyone, but it was one of the mortifying blows of his life that Princeton University had never offered him a position in its history department, and *had not even invited him to lecture* . . . this despite the fact that Amos lived no more than a ten-minute walk away, on Boudinot Place; and had many times indicated by way of hints and allusions put to men connected with university, that he would not mind, he truly would not mind taking a severe reduction in his income someday, in order to enter the academic world. For it was his world, really; his soul was an academician's soul; he had always yearned for the solace of tradition, and American Gothic architecture, and the comforting routine of semesters and seasons, and . . . . But it was never fully formed in his imagination, all that he yearned for.

In any case, no invitation came from the university. And so the years passed.

(Amos had understood all along, in fact, that the Princeton faculty was intensely jealous of him. He had achieved a quiet sort of success in another, more public profession; he had money; he had an attractive wife; unforgivably, he lived in the "West End" of Princeton, one of those residential neighborhoods billed as exclusive by real estate agents — and quite inaccessible to most university employees. Even before he shifted from a genteel sort of anonymity to become locally prominent, Amos had driven a Mercedes-Benz, and had affected an understated English manner in his speech. He wore tweeds of Welsh wool in subdued shades of beige, brown, and mustard.)

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Shortly after his fiftieth birthday, Amos had an unfortunate falling-out with the governor and his circle; and set to work immediately, with a remarkable sort of zeal — a blend, as he called it, of despair and elation — on an analysis of the current political scene in New Jersey and elsewhere. Fueled by disappointment, and a rage that rather surprised him, he wrote in a breezy, malicious, wonderfully fluid style, discussing not only certain public figures with whom he'd long been acquainted (he had even roomed with one of them long ago at Groton), but their wives, their families, their backgrounds, their "life-styles." When he saw that the manuscript was too short, and its material perhaps too thin, he recast it entirely, and launched out with a brilliant derisive energy into a wholesale attack upon contemporary politics in general; and then upon contemporary cultures and mores. He spared neither the clergy nor the Women's Liberation Movement; he ridiculed both liberals and "neoconservatives" alike; he excoriated youth, the middle-aged, and "senior citizens." He gave his book the flamboyant title *Craven New World,* and was secretly shocked at the attention it received when it was published: literally hundreds of reviews, and sales so brisk, as the expression had it, he made the best-seller list in several cities. For years he had toiled away writing serious, meticulously researched books that no one read, and now he found himself thrust into a queer sort of limelight by way of a book of undisguised shallowness . . . a meretricious performance that anyone who knew him well must realize he hadn't *really* meant. The attention disturbed and puzzled him, and in the end left him feeling rather dazed, as if "Amos Kingsley" were a cardboard character in his own imagination, created for no other purpose than to be mercilessly satirized and shredded. Where in the past he had been quietly lauded for his industry, diligence, and fair-mindedness, now he was loudly acclaimed for his hard-hitting, cruel humor. His vision of mankind was compared to Swift's; his prose style hailed as "acerbic," "hilarious," "vitriolic," "lethal." . . .

Before the divorce, when they still discussed such things calmly, Amos's wife, Valerie, had said that he shouldn't have been surprised by the phenomenon: for wasn't the success of his "cheap little exposé" a measure of the very society he had attacked? — wasn't Amos Kingsley's low estimation of human nature now being borne out by his own celebrity?

His wife, his former wife, was an embittered, aging woman who had

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never quite plumbed the depths of the man she married.

She couldn't know how his mirror reflection smirked at him, saying: "You're not going to live forever, *after all.*"

Amos Kingsley was seen about town wearing English sporty togs, carrying a gnarled Highlander walking stick. He smoked parchment-colored cigarillos that emitted a foul scent. His glasses were silver-rimmed and blue-tinted and gave him an air of mystery. It was said that he ordered his suits from Huntsman & Sons of Savile Row. It was said that he rudely declined most social invitations. Sometimes seated in the Mercedes beside him was a delicately handsome youth with pale blond curls and frank blue eyes. . . . No: a hauntingly beautiful young woman with stiff, crimped chestnut-red hair and prominent cheekbones. . . .

By way of a self-measurement chart, Amos ordered a Norfolk jacket from a clothier in London, but when it arrived, it fitted him too tightly under the arms. Nevertheless, he often wore it on his long, brisk afternoon walks in the vicinity of Lake Carnegie. He carried his walking stick as well.

In October he took the train twice weekly to New York City for megavitamin hair treatments at a Fifty-seventh Street hair boutique for men. By degrees his gray hair lightened to a fine silvery blond that was said to flatter his skin coloring. It had the effect, too (it was said), of accentuating the hazel glints in his eyes.

He looked into the possibility of hair transplants, but decided against it since the process would be painful. He looked into the possibility of a toupee, but worried that, in an amorous embrace, or simply a strong wind, it might become dislodged. Amos Kingsley would rather die, he would rather be safely dead, than to be an object of ridicule.

Soon after viewing himself on television for the first time, on a taped interview show, he had his teeth capped; and was gratified by the results.

Now he smiled whenever he chose.

Sometimes he wore a rather rakish maroon beret, sometimes a rumpled Irish hat. His London Fog raincoat was well-used.

Even on stormy days he wore his blue-tinted glasses, which gave him an air of mystery. His depths were not easily to be plumbed. When interviewed, he sometimes smiled coolly and declined to answer. He was not the type to prowl the darkened house at night or to stand coatless and

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bareheaded in the first snowfall of the season, blinking moisture out of his eyes. He never answered the telephone until the third or fourth ring.

At a large Christmas party in Princeton, Amos discovered an acquaintance, a divorced man of his approximate age, in the company of a young woman in her twenties, with a very pale face and chestnut-red hair crimped in the latest fashion. The girl was tall, thin, languid in her movements, so beautiful Amos couldn't keep his eyes off her. She wore a dress of brushed green velvet with a queer, irregular hem and a neckline that opened carelessly across her flat bosom. Though Amos didn't know her companion well — he wasn't even certain of his name — he greeted him warmly and asked to be introduced. Her name was Joy Stevens. Stephens? She worked at Western Electric as a receptionist and was studying silk-screening, and, no, she seemed never to have heard of Amos Kingsley.

Her greenish gray gaze moved indifferently over Amos while he and his acquaintance talked of various things. Their mutual brokerage firm in the city, the demoralized economy, the need to forcibly close the U.S. borders against illegal immigrants. . . .

A few days later Amos came upon the couple in a dim-lit restaurant, amid fake Oriental vases and tapestries and bronzed mirrors. His heart caught when he saw her face, surely it *was* her face? . . . the eyes slightly sunken and slanted at the corners, almond-shaped, sly; the chin held at a provocative angle. A cold, sensual nature. Anemic but passionate. Amos thought of Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix*. He thought of the painting's model, Elizabeth Siddal, who had died young, and had been buried with a packet of Rossetti's poems in her coffin, and afterward exhumed . . . so that the poet could retrieve his poems and publish them. Or was the story fraudulent?

Amos passed close by their table, not looking directly at them — and perhaps they recognized him; perhaps they didn't. In a bronze-flaked mirror, he saw the young woman laughing, tilting back her head, showing very damp, very white teeth.

Amos struck up a conversation with a short, muscular, swarthy-skinned boy at the mall. The boy was about nineteen years old and smiled frequently. He had been playing a video game called Annihilate when Amos approached him, and he chattered easily about the game, and about

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other games. Amos asked if such games were addictive, as it was commonly charged.

This was on a midwinter day in an indeterminate month. Amos could not recall whether his wife had died yet, but when the boy asked him, after a considerable period of time, if he was married, or lived alone, or what, he told the boy that he'd received word only a few hours before that his former wife had died (had *died*?) in a fall down a flight of stairs (down a flight of *stairs*?) while visiting someone in Seattle. Amos brushed tears angrily from his eyes and said that no one would tell him how it had happened; whether she'd been drunk at the time, or what.

The boy, whose name was Jimmy, or Timmy, and who may have lived in Trenton, told Amos he was sorry to hear it. Then he added, giggling, "But you better stay on your side, bud," since Amos had been about to sit down beside him in the booth.

Amos watched, fascinated, as the boy devoured a half-pizza with cheese, pepperoni, anchovies, and onions, and drank three sixty-nine-cent Cokes. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, but the sun had already set. All the lights of the mall were winking and blazing; it was a cheery, warm, communal setting, many young people gathered there; the McDonald's that opened directly onto the "B" floor seemed to be a particularly popular place. While the boy ate, Amos talked to him quietly about the emptiness of his house, the rooms he avoided, voices and footfalls and accusations he sometimes heard in the night. He had loved his wife as a young man loves his young wife — but hadn't that been a very long time ago, and isn't love soluble in Time? — O surely, surely! Tears of contempt started in his eyes as he spoke of the women — widows, aging divorcées, pathetic separated wives — who were pursuing him since he had become a free man. Since he had become a celebrity. Perhaps he would spend the remainder of the winter in Trinidad and lie senseless in the sun, in an ecstasy of flesh. Had Jimmy — Timmy? — ever visited Trinidad?

"Well — that's it, man," the boy said, rising out of the booth, "Got to be going, man; take it easy," he said, giving Amos a slight blow on the left shoulder, a remarkable comradely pat, which Amos felt tingling and pulsing for the rest of the day.

Spells of vertigo, shortness of breath, a queer constriction of the chest and throat. . . . He was trying to explain that it mustn't be attributed to

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him, his former wife's alcoholic ruin, but the television lights were blinding as a tropical sun. "What lies ahead for Western Civilization, Mr. Kingsley?" he was being asked, "— Do you concur with the pessimistic outlook of George Orwell in his classic *1984*? And do you believe that the Sexual Revolution has gotten out of hand so far as youth are concerned?" Amos had bought a costly three-piece suit for the occasion, tailored by Chipp of Madison Avenue, and though it fitted his softening form perfectly, it was too warm for the television lights. He could feel a trickle of perspiration running down his side. Even as he spoke in his clipped, precise, elegantly modulated sentences, with a bit of British inflection, he could feel the pancake makeup on his face begin to melt. Off-camera, muffled titters and giggles.

AMOS KINGSLEY gave a cocktail party to which no one came. He had invited several dozen people — old friends, neighbors, business acquaintances, men and women who should have wanted to commiserate with him over his divorce — but no one came. Had the invitations been mailed out? Had they been properly stamped? One invitation, sent to "Joy Stevens" at her place of work — Squibb, as Amos recalled — came back stamped "Addressee Unknown."

But his career prospered. The clumsy attacks made by the governor's publicity team only whetted the public's appetite for *Amos Kingsley*. He received a telegram notifying him he had won a coveted Federal Arts & Humanities grant; rumor had it he'd been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize; fan mail arrived daily from every part of the United States, from England, the Philippines, South Africa. For several giddy hours one Saturday, he signed copies of *Craven New World* in a Madison Avenue bookstore, and each time his signature had looked different. Odd, then, that he should have begun to tremble violently in the sixth hour; and asked to be led away. "We can't be expected to live forever," he said, beginning to cry helpless, bitter tears, "— Who is it who expects us to live forever!"

He struggled to wake — he kicked and thrashed and choked for air —but he could not dissolve the dream. Horribly, it came to him *that he was already awake.*

When Amos Kingsley returned to Princeton from a highly successful

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publicity tour in the Midwest, there were twenty-seven calls recorded on his answering machine. The most mysterious was from "Jacky" and "Jenny," girls with soft, high-pitched voices who spoke in perfect unison, saying they were real sorry Mr. Kingsley wasn't at home, but they would be getting in contact with him again soon. Another message from "Billy Hendrie" said he would be getting in contact with Mr. Kingsley again soon.

An admirer of Amos Kingsley's from La Jolla, California, sent him a rhinoceros-head-mask of papier-mâché and plywood. The face sagged with wrinkles; the nostrils were immense, the horn touchingly modest. Amos laughingly set it on his shoulders, *where it remains till this day, fixed fast.*

"But does the world look any different, seen through rhinoceros eyes?"

Though he believed he had severed sentimental ties with his wife of twenty-six years, it somehow happened that they agreed to meet on neutral territory, in New York City, one day in late winter. Amos grumbled that they hadn't much to discuss any longer — weren't their lawyers taking care of *everything*? — but poor Valerie seemed eager to talk. She turned out to be an attractive woman in her early fifties, with brown graying hair worn in a french twist; a slender, quivering neck; anxious eyes.

The subject was Amos's recent transformation. He had become a public crank, a curmudgeon, a "witty" fascist, a "gentleman" racist.... "How can you let them goad you into saying such things?" Valerie demanded. "You've never been like this — it isn't *you* — are you going insane?"

An attractive woman, if a little too passionate for his taste. Too "earnest." Her problem was (as Amos wearily recalled) that she was *aging* and no longer (to be blunt, to be frank for once) *desirable*. Which is to say, she failed to inspire, or stimulate, or provoke *desire*.

Insane? Sane? Amos regretted he had left his rhino head back in Princeton. It might have eased the tension in the air.

"You don't mean most of what you say — I realize that — but other people don't — other people will think — Other people —"

It seemed a pity Valerie had come a great distance to tell him such banal truths. Such pitiful platitudes. And all as a consequence of female envy. Amos could barely keep from yawning . . . he *did* yawn, behind his hand.

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Another drink?

Amos made a kindly pretense of listening, though he felt an aesthetic revulsion for an *aging, attractive female* with tears in her eyes and a quavering, reproachful voice. She spoke now of Amos's health, his emotional health — perhaps he should see a doctor soon, a psychiatrist, someone who might help him without judging him. Again she said: "You've never been like this; it isn't *you*."

The rhino mask did not dare to speak. The expression was too humanly melancholy, the horn too meek. *I am a deep, sensual being. My nature is dark — fathomless — voracious — evil. You cannot satisfy it —how could you presume! You! You — woman!*

After some ninety minutes of conversation, in which, intermittently (as it turned out), Amos participated, the Kingsleys — the former Kingsleys — parted with the (erroneous) understanding that Amos would see a doctor immediately, a psychiatrist, a psychoanalyst, "someone who would help" (in Valerie's prissy words) "without judging."

Amos hurried into the hall, hoping to head off Valerie, but it was too late; she brushed past into the bedroom — into the dim, languorous, slatted light of the late afternoon — and saw swarthy-skinned Jimmy asleep amidst the bedclothes, his pouty lips parted, his black curls disheveled, one muscular hairy arm stretched above his head in a gesture of luxurious abandon. . . .

"*I told you not to go inside! I warned you!*" Amos hissed.

"Jacky" (for "Jacqueline") and "Jenny" (for "Jennifer") were twin thirteen-year-olds who giggled over their notepads as they interviewed the famous author who lived on Boudinot Place scarcely a mile from the junior high school. They were very pretty, very pretty indeed, with pale red frizzy hair, pale freckled faces, thick-lashed green eyes, moist bee-stung lips. . . . Their identical jeans snugly fitted their identical little buttocks.

The girls took turns — now Jacky, now Jenny, now Jacky, now Jenny —as they read off questions in an identical voice from a computer printout resting upon Jacky's right knee and Jenny's left knee. From time to time they glanced up shyly at Amos. . . . What is your considered opinion regarding our nation's leaders, and is there any hope for the. . . . Is it true that. . . . On page 28 of your recent book, you make the statement

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that. . . . Jenny struck Amos as the more intelligeht of the two, but Jacky was more flirtatious.

It was a balmy, giddy day in mid-April. Amos Kingsley, an attractive older man, delicately graying ("silvering," to be accurate) at the temples, answered questions courteously and lucidly and did not hesitate to repeat himself if he saw that his long Augustan sentences were arousing dismay in his young friends. Jacky licked her lips as she hunched over her spiral notepad; Jenny crinkled her lovely smooth brow. Identical fuzzy-peach sweaters snugly fitted their identical little torsos. Jacky wore blue Adidas running shoes, Jenny a pair of mud-stained loafers.

Amos Kingsley, an attractive older man, though no older than their daddies, boasted a dapper moustache; a "grease wool" sweater, undyed, ordered direct from Wales; snug-fitting jeans bought at the mall one day, more or less for a lark. . . . His blue-tinted glasses had been replaced by contact lenses ingeniously ground to accommodate eyes requiring bifocal correction. He *was* no older than their daddies, surely. Their daddy. Yes? Would you repeat that question, please? A thought-provoking question, a devilishly difficult question. . . .

Jacky shivered and giggled and licked the point of her pencil. Jenny surprised the *colorful local curmudgeon* by peering at him through her thick lashes in a look of unmistakable subtlety. Sweet girls! Though somewhat naughty, like all their kind.

Eventually, alas, the long sheet of questions was exhausted. The spiral notepads were put away, the pencils, the pensive, schoolgirl frowns.

Amos served his charming interlocutresses carmel-fudge-ripple ice cream from Thomas Sweet's and fluted madelines from La Cuisine, which they ate greedily. In jest he offered them sherry — a deliciously sweet Italian sherry — and the little darlings quite surprised him by accepting. (Though neither finished hers, as it turned out. In fact, "Jenny's" glass disappeared altogether.)

So the afternoon of April 19 passed agreeably. In fact, it passed marvelously despite the fact that Amos's left eye was watering, and he didn't want to excuse himself to remove his contact lenses in the midst of the interview.

He couldn't remember when he'd had a more absorbing and demanding interview. Or a more fascinating three-way conversation. At one point during the sociable part of the visit, Amos sent the twins into peals of

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childish laughter by donning his paper-mâché rhino head, *which the much-honored local celebrity wore with hilarious dignity. Though the famous author was rumored to have come within a hairbreadth this year of winning the sought-after Pulitzer, he displayed a delightful comical side to his complex nature by donning a rhinoceros head made of cardboard and galloping gaily about the room and "feinting" with the horn. Though older than all our combined daddies, he showed himself a good sport by giving no sign when sudden pains gripped his chest and shortness of breath put a damper on the merriment. . . .*

At the conclusion of the visit, both Jacky and Jenny excused themselves to use Amos's downstairs guest bathroom, but, oddly, only one of them returned. "Are you Jacky or Jenny?" Amos asked, rising uncertainly to his feet. "I'm afraid I can't tell you apart."

The freckled thirteen-year-old cast Amos a peculiar look. As she hunted up her purse, she said: "Mr Kingsley, you know my name is Janey. Janey Cleveland."

Amos stared. Then he saw that it was a joke, a typical little-girl's joke, not intended to be cruel. He said: "Now look — you're either Jacky or Jenny, and I'm afraid I can't tell you apart. Can your daddies — I mean, your daddy — tell you apart?"

"I don't know any Jacky or Jenny," the girl said, edging toward the hallway, "but anyway, thanks for the interview, Mr. Kingsley. My teacher, Mrs. Denbo, will be getting in touch with you —"

"No, wait," Amos said, laughing awkwardly, "you *must* be Jacky: I recognize your running shoes. And where is Jenny?" He followed the girl into the front hall and saw that the door to the guest bathroom was ajar, and when he opened it further, no one was inside. "Where is Jenny?" he asked, running a perplexed hand through his hair. "Is Jenny hiding?"

"I don't know about any Jenny," the girl said, now in a hurry to leave, opening the front door for herself, "— but thanks a lot for the interview, Mr. Kingsley. Good-bye."

She ran out the front walk while Amos stared at her. "Jacky?" he cried. "Wait. I realize it's a prank, a harmless little prank, but it *is* confusing. . . . Jacky? Jenny? Come back. *I said, come back.*"

But the freckled thirteen-year-old ran away down the block without so much as glancing back. Impossible to judge whether her slender shoulders were shaking with laughter, the cruelest sort of laughter, or whether her

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wiry little body was intent solely upon escape.

Amos rushed about the downstairs, calling, "Jenny? Jenny? *Jacky!*"

But the girl was nowhere to be found.

"Jenny? Your sister has left, and I think you should leave, too," Amos said, his voice as controlled as he could manage under the circumstances, "— do you hear? I think you should leave, too. *The joke has gone far enough.*"

He examined the guest bathroom and found one of the towels damp and slightly wrinkled; and the "lemon" soap in the soap dish wet. But no red-haired little Jenny or Jacky was hiding inside. Next he examined his study — where the interview had been held — and found only two sherry glasses, one of which he had used himself. True, there *were* two ice cream bowls, but now he couldn't remember if he had joined the twins in their snack. He believed he had not — he had no taste for ice cream — but the inside of his mouth felt coated and sweetish, and he couldn't *quite* recall. . . .

"Jacky?" he called out, hunting about the house. "Jenny? Where are you, little girl? Where are you hiding, little girl? You'd better leave, because the joke has gone far enough, and Amos is losing his patience, d'you hear? It's Jenny, isn't it? Jenny? The joke has gone far enough, Jenny! *Jenny!*"

For several hours he searched the house, downstairs and up, even the cellar, even the attic. Shortly past dusk he heard a faint soft giggle, but he couldn't locate its source. And in his own bedroom, he saw that the bedspread was queerly bunched up *as if a slender female form were hiding beneath it:* but when he whipped it away, no one was there. Only rumpled sheets, graying, ill-smelling sheets. . . .

"You little bitch!" Amos shouted. "If I catch you, you'll be sorry! *If I catch you or your sister, you'll be sorry!*"

Amos's physician strongly suggested he check into the hospital for a battery of tests. This was in early May. And when Amos emerged a week later, it was with a bitter sort of triumph, *as the fools had found nothing wrong,* save slightly high blood pressure and a hemorrhoidal condition.

He exchanged gloating smirks with his mirror reflection. He'd had both problems for the past decade, or was it longer? — and they hadn't killed him yet.

The naughty little minx Jenny (or Jacky) never revealed herself, but

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Amos was well aware of her presence in his house. Footfalls on the stairs, muffled giggles as he stepped into a room, a pungent whiff of her indefinable little-girl scent at the least anticipated of times. . . . No fool, he had long ago stopped calling her name; and never gave any indication of actively searching for her, since that only increased the general mirth. But under his breath he often panted: " . . . *If I catch you, if I lay hands on you, O wicked little girl, what then!*"

But he never laid hands on her: she was too quick.

Before this unexpected development, Amos had considered selling his house. His former wife most adamantly did not want it (she declared herself severed from Boudinot Place forever), and it *was* uncomfortably large for one person. Now, however, Amos was reluctant to put it on the market. The girl's ghostly presence would jinx things; he could only be embarrassed; tongues would wag even more maliciously than usual.

When his attorney in the divorce suit dropped by for a drink, Amos tried to concentrate on their conversation, but the girl's presence — or the threat of her presence — distracted him. He knew he was being offered sound advice, excellent and invaluable private advice, to sell the house, to divide the money with the former Mrs. Kingsley, to cut down on interviews and publicity appearances, to resist being goaded into saying "uncharacteristic things" . . . but he found it wretchedly difficult to concentrate, since little Jenny had hidden herself behind the very sofa on which he sat, and was *lewdly tickling his calves and blowing against the hairs on his legs* even as his companion spoke.

He nodded, he nodded eagerly, gravely, frowningly, tragically, O yes, he knew, he agreed, he *wasn't* himself, and *hadn't been himself* for a long time, but soon things would settle down, soon he'd be back on an even keel, he was in the midst of a new book, a savage, comical broadside sort of attack, more ambitious than the first book, funnier, more slanted for the "popular" market, he put in at least six hours every day, day after day, he had set himself a rigorous schedule, it was the puritan in him, the academician manqué, yes, he knew he shouldn't refuse to speak with his former wife, yes, he knew he should put the house on the market, but he had a sentimental attachment to it, it wasn't that easy to extricate himself from the past. . . .

It took a half hour, forty-five minutes, to get rid of his visitor so that, undisturbed, he might return to the task at hand: to the fray, so to speak.

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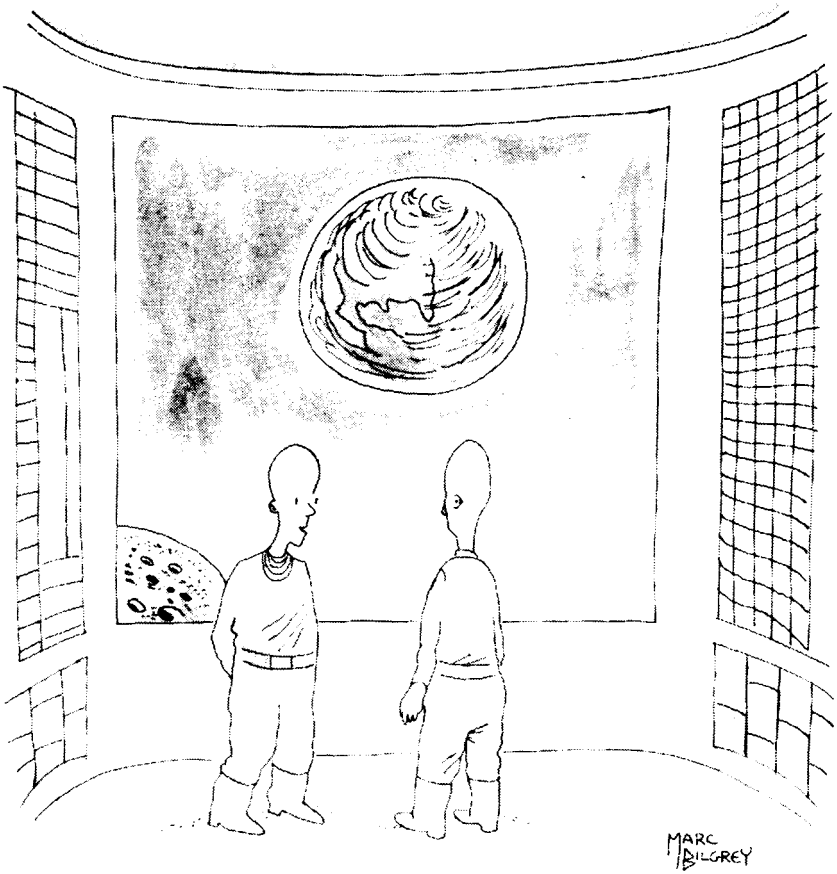
"Little Jenny, O wicked little girl, Amos has a surprise for you, but you'll have to get it in person. . . ."

So he crooned, though he halfway knew she wouldn't reveal herself, at least not before dark.



"Shall we colonize it, destroy it or just land in some obscure backwater and tantalize some hick!"

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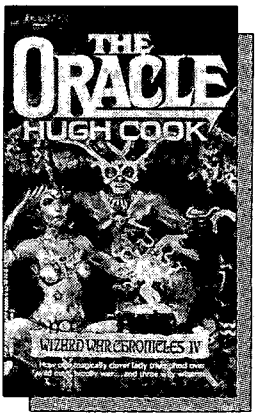

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A WORD FROM Brian Thomsen

BANG! SWOOSH! KABOOM! Such are the sounds of that most quiet and peaceful of all pastimes: reading.

What would a swordfight be like without the clashing of steel, or the casting of a spell without that whoosh or twinkle? The galloping of steeds, the sound of thunder—all are necessary sound effects for a WIZARD WAR novel.

Likewise, the zap of a blaster or the thud of a closing airlock are intrinsic background noises for a space opera; and even though we may have never seen a space skimmer crash, an alien vaporized, or a demon dispelled, we just naturally fill in the sound effects.

In a way, both THE ORACLE and CROWN OF THE SERPENT are action-packed books filled with the sounds of adventure; but the noise isn't on the page...it's all inside your head.

When you see me around, don't forget to ask me about Catspaw (or if possible, just read my mind).

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Red Army, Ralph Peters, Pocket hardcover, $18.95

The Red Eagles, David Downing, Worldwide Library, $3.95

and *reductio ad absurdum* . . .

. . . What goes on in a reviewer's mind, Part 2:

THERE ARE apparently several ways to do the thing. A popular one is to have the editor send you a packet of books — or, in highfalutin' places, a tattered Jiffy bag of one book — and then you go do the job on it because that's your assignment.

That is something like the way I work it with the Chicago *Sun-Times*, except that the Book Review editor there, Henry Kisor, is one of God's good human beings, makes a very definite effort to cater to my now-established taste in popular literature, and — though he does tend to send over two and even sometimes three titles in a batch — has been known to accept columns in which I simply report I couldn't stand to get all the way through *The Bourne Identity*, for instance.

Or the most recent case, in which I reported to him that while I had gotten all the way through Frederick Forsyth's *The Negotiator*, I had deliberately left it on an airplane and consequently couldn't remember the publisher's name.

And then there's this column, which I'm sure sometimes drives Ed and Audrey to distraction with its lateness, peculiar formatting, and, worse, its almost kittenish caprices.

Fact is, what my column's going to be about is as much of a surprise to them as it is to me. The little red-white-and-blue truck from Federal Express brings it to them over the hills and through the woods all the way from the Hartford airport at the last conceivably possible moment. The Muse has already done exactly the same to me, except her truck is a different color and runs somewhat less reliably.

For the purposes of this column, whose lineage traces back into the

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late 1960s, I have evolved the technique of letting books assign themselves to me. I have heaps of them, and every Christmas the Parcel Post and UPS drivers linger on my porch, making cheerful conversation about "all those packages I bring you," until I thank them — in all sincerity — and ask about their children. At the rate of three books each and every day, originals and reprints, some nonfiction, a few story collections but mostly novels, some advance galleys — and some of those actually bound, so that I do contemplate reading them — but mostly production copies of paperbacks,* you can see what that arithmetic adds up to.

What am I to do? In truth, what I have been doing since I first did that arithmetic, back in 1968 or whatever it was, when arithmetic was only half as thick. I pick the books I would pick if I were walking through a bookstore that month, in whatever that month's frame of mind is, with what reading time is made available to me that month by my day job. I think you can safely assume that anyone who has been writing a self-assigned regular column for any length of time does essentially the same. Unless, of course, he or she takes bribes. But you will be happy to know that in SF, at least, we are at present free of that in the major prozines. (Nor has it ever been a prevalent factor.)

So. Why, of all things, am I going to talk about two books not marketed as SF? Well, one of them was assigned to me, along with the shabby Forsyth, by the *Sun-Times* and, incidentally, turned out to be head and shoulders the best new reading I'd gotten in months. More relevantly, it *is* SF, and it was chewy fun working out exactly how this could be so. In other words, this book did its trick . . . it came to my attention, and then it excellently did the good thing, which was to be an at least interesting reading experience, and while it was doing that it did the essential thing, which was to show me an attractive bypath toward getting to know better what it is about SF that's attractive to me.*

The book in question is *Red Army*, by Ralph Peters, who is billed as a U.S. Army Intelligence captain but would probably in a flash of

* *Which means they've almost invariably not only gone off sale but have been expunged from the annals of Humankind by the time you see my review. Of course, most of them do not suffer by that process, though Humankind has been known to wince.*

* *It's arrogant to assume that if something attracts me, it will be of some interest to you. But what other working basis could there be!*

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smoke and noises-off be made some bravo three-star general's Chief of Staff if a war burst forth. In fact, you have to wonder if the Peters identity exactly mirrors the truth of its author, though that, too, is not relevant here. What is relevant is Rudyard Kipling.

Kipling, as you may know, was a dandy SF writer. Somewhere, in one of those "complete works" sets, you should find his "With the Night Mail" and "As Easy as ABC." Particularly the latter; I think it's where another warfare buff, Cordwainer Smith, got his idea of science fiction. However that may be, you won't find it quaint, even after all these years; you'll find it chilling, particularly if you've ever heard of the late 1960s or are aware that they're coming back in mutant form.

In my "complete works" set, however, you will also find "The Army of A Dream." And just as "ABC" is quintessential SF, so "The Army of A Dream" is quintessentially not. It's an outright piece of polemic.

Kipling was, in his main avocation, the translator of imperial *realkrieg* to those in Queen Victoria's day who felt themselves sufficiently connected to their times so as to read unassigned text. And Kipling both lived off that and was bitter about how what hooked the bulk of his readers was the romance of military power exercised (at a safe distance), rather than the actuality that the purpose of armed forces is to prevent war. "Oh, it's Tommy this, and Tommy that, and Tommy, go away, but it's Thank you, Mr. Atkins! when the band begins to play," he wrote. For those who understand that combat always begins as the consequence of a breakdown in the preferred purpose of a military establishment, that poem sums it up.

Whatever, one day something snapped, and Kipling decided to tell his readers what their folly was. He proposed a relatively simple and quite possibly viable scheme to create a military force so enthusiastic, and so popularly supported in peacetime, that it would have taken a fool to threaten the nation that housed it. But he reasoned that if he simply wrote it up as an essay, the idea would never attract the attention of the general public. So he wrote it up as a fantasy story.

And the public still paid no attention. Why? Because it was a lousy story. The viewpoint character *said* it was set in a future reached via dream, but in that pseudofuture people spoke only in speeches and only for horatory purposes, and they all-but-spokenly agreed that this Kipling fellow had a total grip on the exact truth hidden from more confused mortals.

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Now, I was about to say: "And this, it turns out, is what makes the story un-SFnal . . ." or some such thing, until I recalled SF's rich tradition of stuff exactly like that by SFnists far too well established to be questioned. So, back into the dark recesses of rumination, and onward with the process.*

The Kipling trap, by the way, is utterly avoided by Peters in *Red Army*, a brilliantly depicted account of the invasion of West Germany, all told from the level of the people being shot at while carrying the tools . . . grunts, small-unit commanders, special-operations personnel, engineer and artillery company commanders, on up no higher than the commanders and staffs actually engaged in combat, not a one of whom has time or inclination to make a speech or reflect on the Big Picture. Writing in an expertly deployed, clear, communicative prose, Peters makes sure that not a one of his creations has the slightest inkling of the presence of an author.

* *Except that, tucked away in the "Conditional" folder, there is now the thought of a future column on non-SF wittingly or unwittingly marketed to the SF audience on the sheer momentum of SF bylines so notable that they might feel, consciously or otherwise, that anything they write need not be self-examined for SF content, NB: Lay in a fresh stock of periods, Budrys; the commas and semicolons ain't quite making do.*

Getting on up from Kipling toward our own time, we note the presence in our history of "The Battle of Dorking," a suppositious account of the invasion of England, written purely as a sort of literary war-game by a purely military author. It is said that reading this work, or at least knowing of it and its nature, inspired H.G. Wells to write *The War of The Worlds*, and perhaps that's true. What's more true is that Wells could direct memorable communication to the general audience, whereas reading a copy of "The Battle . . .," let alone finding one, indicates that it belongs where it is, in the "Complete Unread Works of The World."

And fairly recently, we have had the speculative military works of such authors as S.L.A. Marshall, in whose book on the Korean Police Action will be found the prescriptions for fighting the next war. Those of course were then applied in Viet Nam with such brilliant success. *Porkchop Hill* was made into a halfway decent Korean infantry combat film for Gregory Peck, on the accustomed romanticized model the public could grasp; the more abstruse prescriptive inputs in Marshall's book eventually led to Hamburger Hill . . . and apparently to the USSR's military debacle in Afghanistan.

Some of the key characters in

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Red Army are veterans of Afghanistan. All the characters in Peters's book are members of the Soviet armed forces, or their loved ones. And he has pulled off the SF trick; he has gotten into the minds of aliens, and made them seem quite workaday normal, while not for a moment making them any more or less likeable than given members of any other set of individuals. In that respect, the parallel to Frederik Pohl's *Chernobyl* is striking. Yet *Chernobyl*, though by an SF writer, is not SF; the mere presence of the SFnal facility for effectively depicting aliens did not suffice to do it for Pohl any more than it would do for Peters. Similarly, the mere facts that Kipling may have been right; that "Dorking" caught the fancy of an SF artist; that "Slam" Marshall was as wrong as Verne in going to the Moon by cannonade — none of that makes *Red Army* SF. Yet it is, it is; I can feel it in my bones.

Which bones? The tingle-bones. *Red Army*, despite Pocket's marketing position on it, is SF because all the detail in it — the battle scenes, the tactical planning, the motivations of the various characters in it — proves in the end to have been marshalled to a single, clear philosophical point about the actual purpose of modern military combat. This is exactly in the nature of speculative fiction, for all that the science here displayed is military science, an uncommon vehicle in our immediate sense of the SF field. But just as the genetics or electronics or astronautics or whatever in more customary SF stories is in fact used simply to lend verisimilitude to the author's ultimate message, so it is with *Red Army*. The detail is not there for its own sake, as it is in *Porkchop Hill* or "Dorking" or "Dream." It is there simply to seduce the reader into total agreement with the author's right to a definitive opinion . . . which, by the way, is that brilliantly simple premise: the purpose of modern military combat is to validate public relations campaigns.

No wonder Peters — a truly gifted writer, by the way, whose prose is a pleasure to read and whose storytelling ability is first-class — reinvented the outstanding SF technical invention; he needed it in order to do what *Astounding* did for so many years.

So it's O.K. — it's highly recommended — that if you want a pure-quill SF read, you should step right up to the "techno-military thriller" shelves at the store and get yourself that thrill.

And then there's *The Red Eagles*, a plot-counterplot thriller about clandestine actions to steal uranium from the U.S. in 1944 so the

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Nazis (or the Russkies) can make atomic bombs.

This is, in effect, an alternate-world novel in which World War II-model fission bombs did not use plutonium, the Soviet Union could have built the bomb at any time if only it had had a native supply of uranium, and furthermore the German research teams had essentially the right design for a bomb. But the author doesn't know these are very shaky assertions, or he doesn't care; instead of telling the reader: "I'm bringing you an intriguing supposition," he's saying: "I'm calling you a fool." That is not the promise of SF.

What's more, his thriller plot breaks down toward the end, with hero and heroine living happily ever after in middleclass bliss despite all the murders they've committed, and assertedly assuring themselves of this by blowing away an assassin whose absence they will never, never be able to account for to the duly constituted authorities hired to protect middleclass bliss from nefarious infiltrators.

So you can't read it as SF, and you can't read it as a thriller. You certainly can't read it as history.

I bring all this up because more and more often, now, we find ourselves among store shelves covered in titles set in the future — as Forsyth's *The Negotiator* is, and as *Red Army* is — or in a past situation involving puissant technology, as *The Red Eagles* is, or some of Jack Higgins's and Ken Follett's works are — and you don't know whether it's SF or what. Obviously, most of us read or what in addition to SF, but it's nice to know how to set your head.

Say . . . there may be a purpose to having book reviewers, after all.

NOTED:

On paperback racks and in bookstores everywhere, you should be able to find, for $4.95, *L. Ron Hubbard Presents WRITERS OF THE FUTURE Volume V*, edited by Algis Budrys. It contains fourteen works of fiction by new authors, and is the latest in this highly popular and critically well-received line of SF anthologies. There are also essays of advice to new writers by L. Ron Hubbard, Jane Yolen, Marta Randall, and Hal Clement, as well as an essay by Frank Kelly-Freas, who served as Director of Illustration. Would you like to know what I think of the book's quality and whether I recommend it? I signed my name to it.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

On My Way to Paradise, Dave Wolverton (Bantam, December 1989)

ANGELO IS a decent man, a pharmacist serving his impoverished, war-torn community in Panama. Then a woman comes into his life — a powerful dreamer, a fugitive from the most dangerous man on Earth — and Angelo's world collapses. His best friend is killed. Angelo himself commits murder. He is forced off planet and into training as a mercenary soldier, where he finds himself becoming a hardened killer. It is a terrible change; he feels his very soul dying within him. Was he always a murderer in disguise, his seeming kindness and altruism merely a mask he was able to wear because his inner evil had never been exposed?

The answer to that question is the heart of one of the deepest and most powerful science fiction novels ever written. Wolverton's characters all have their own answers to questions of ethics, their own justification for their behavior. Yet such is Wolverton's artistry that the discussion of ethics never takes over the story; on the contrary, the storytelling is so deft that the discussions *are* action, in the best Asimovian tradition.

Do you want to read a brilliant military novel in the tradition of Haldeman's *Forever War*? Then watch as Angelo and his fellow mercenaries are brutally and efficiently trained by the Samurais of the planet Baker to take part in their genocidal war. These are not the innocent children I depicted in *Ender's Game*, either. These are adults, with their own painful pasts that get acted out in agonizingly realistic simulated battles.

Do you want to read a serious extrapolative novel, in which the future of Earth is driven by the rivalry between fading Japan and rising China for cultural domination; in which cyborging, brain transplants, and genetically-altered chimeras bring new wonders and new horrors to humanity; in which new machines and artificial intelligences blur the boundary between tool and user? Wolverton's world creation is superb, surpassed in *my* experience only by Bruce Sterling, the master of extrapolation himself.

Do you want to read a novel of character? Then watch these people in flux — cyborgized, rejuvenated, crippled, genetically altered; dehuman-

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* *Engines of Creation*, K. Eric Drexler
Nanotechnology, including submicroscopic robots to repair human bodies. 1986 quality paperback edition, 301 pages.

* *Living Longer, Growing Younger*, Dr. Paul Segall with Carol Kahn. Brand new 1989 hard cover, 254 pages, by the research director of Cryomedical Sciences Inc.

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ized as refugees, samurais, mercenaries, machines. Yet despite all these deformations, they are still human — even the chimeras who are forced by their genes to bond with Angelo because of his chance resemblance to another man. Even though they know their devotion to him is involuntary, they still feel that devotion and act upon it; and because Angelo *is* a decent man, their willingness to sacrifice for him becomes a terrible burden even as it saves his life.

Do you want to read a grand adventure, with great wars, worlds to win, civilizations to conquer or save? Do you want to see the madness of grand, noble sacrifices? A mutiny sparked by uttering the single, near-magical word *Pizarro*? An unrequited love that transcends betrayal, mutilation, even death?

Do you want a perverse but moving romance between a gentle old man and a harsh, victimized chimera, the only female commander among the mercenaries? Friendship and enmity, community and loneliness, guilt and redemption, suffering and joy — they're all here.

What's most astonishing is that Wolverton seems to be such a *nice* man. A great big huggable teddy bear of a guy, with a soft voice and a sweet smile. How could he write such a cruel and magnificent story? Then you learn that he spent a while as a guard at the Utah State Prison, and you imagine him carrying a billy-club and telling you — softly, with a smile — to get in line, and it occurs to you that maybe his gentleness is an act of will, that despite his kindness he knows exactly how terrible the human soul can be.

I hesitate to tell you that this is Dave Wolverton's first novel. The book is so mature in its sensibility, so strong in its artistry, so deep in its invention that most of us who write fiction would be proud to have such a novel as the culmination, not the beginning, of our career. Many fine works that have won Hugos and Nebulas pale beside this book.

Though Wolverton won the grand prize in the second Writers of the Future competition for a novelet that became the first two chapters of *On My Way to Paradise*, his is hardly a household name. The book may even be hard to find — first novels rarely leap off the shelves. So I'm publishing this review early, before the book comes out. Write down the name. Pester your bookstore to order it. Buy it the minute it comes in. Read it at once. I promise you that you will be pressing copies on your friends, urging them to read it.

I believe that this novel will be remembered as the first book by the finest science fiction writer of the 1990s. I suspect that we may someday look back on *On My Way to Paradise* as the first stirring of one of

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the great American writers of our time. I know for a fact, however, that people who read science fiction because they want an exhilarating combination of intelligence and adventure will love every page of this book.

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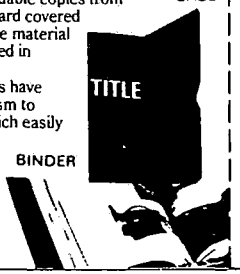

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Sheila Finch was born in London and now lives in California, where she teaches at El Camino College and writes science fiction. She has had three novels published by Bantam, INFINITY'S WEB, TRIAD, and THE GARDEN OF THE SHAPED. Her first F&SF story concerns a xenolinguist — a woman trained to communicate with aliens — on a planet that seems devoid of life . . .

A World Waiting

By Sheila Finch

IT NEVER OCCURRED to you to call me on the Net and tell me my sister's been dead for six months?"

Trembling with shock and anger, Oona Nikos leaned against the flimsy canvas walls of the research station's office, then thought better of it and stood up straight. The office was filled with greenish gray light filtering through the canvas, making everything look as if it were underwater. Outside, someone was dragging Oona's battered duffel bag with its faded Xenolinguists' Guild insignia across the compound to the guest quarters.

Gunther Hayward, chief scientist of the station, ignored her. He was scanning the day's reports on a small monitor on the makeshift desk, three crates upended in a neat line with a plastiwood board stretched across. Her brother-in-law had a perfectionist's obsession for putting things in order that Oona remembered only too well.

"Well?" Oona demanded. "I had a right to know!"

"Net time's expensive." Hayward looked up, frowning. "Besides, I have

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a very important job to complete here. What difference would a message have made anyway? Caitlin would still be dead. And since it's a ten-month trip from New Hyong station, I knew you were already on your way."

This was more cold-blooded than she would have expected, even from him. Though a dozen years older than when she'd last seen him, he was still muscular, bronzed, and as arrogant as he'd been when they were all students in Athens. The three of them had spent long evenings together, sipping ouzo, arguing history and politics and metaphysics, falling in love. It was hard to remember she'd once fought her sister over this man — a real, hair-pulling tussle that Oona, older and stronger, won. Months later she stood beside her sister when a radiant Caitlin married Gunther Hayward, two years out of the Academy and already a prominent exobiologist, ichthyologist, pilot, and small-motor mechanic, amongst other things. The sisters went on to separate careers, Caitlin in biochemistry, Oona in xenolinguistics. And though she saw less of Caitlin and Gunther after the wedding, Oona thought her sister had the worst of the bargain.

"It never occurred to you that I might have wanted to cancel my stopover and go straight to my next assignment?"

"Ah yes," the object of the sisters' rivalry said. "Still making noises at life's aborted attempts at something resembling human intelligence, isn't it?"

She hated him. But she was stuck with him; there'd be no shuttle for four months. She stared out the window, her guts knotted by grief and anger.

Land on Mynah was an afterthought. The seas covered more than 80 percent of the surface, and this station was on one of the scattered islands of a thin archipelago that spanned the planet's equator. The office stood on a slight rise, and from here she could see down to a small lagoon that the scientists had closed off as a pen for the tursiops workers they'd brought with them. What was she going to do for four months? She was trained to communicate with aliens, but her sister had described the planet on the rare occasions she'd managed to get Net time: there was no life on Mynah. There were oceans, rivers, mountains, rolling plains that elsewhere might have been lush grassland; there was rainfall, mild breezes, warm sunlight. But absolutely nothing alive.

The real puzzle, according to Caitlin, was whether life had never developed — and in which case, what mechanism had produced such a tolera-

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ble atmosphere — or if life had died off. Later perhaps there'd be time to explore Mynah's secrets; right now there was the more desperate need to relocate some of Earth's excess population. As soon as the scientists finished their tests, the colonists would be coming.

Hayward glanced up at Oona suddenly, his gray eyes catching the marine light. "We're shorthanded — just six men here. There's work you could do."

She wondered how Caitlin had managed to stand the man. "Thanks. I don't enjoy messing about with boats."

He grinned suddenly, and she had a glimpse of the self-confident, charming youth they had once both found so attractive. "I thought all the lingsters were porpoise lovers?"

"We train with dolphin tutors — orcas," she said. "But that's a special case. I don't know anything about *Tursiops truncatus*."

"Not what I meant! Jorge Wang, our geologist, also has degrees in human and veterinary medicine. I thought you could fine-tune our tursiops language program."

"You're consulting the dolphins on this project?"

"God no!" Hayward said impatiently. "Their job is to map marine features so we can decided where to locate which species of fish to feed a colony. I don't need to know their opinion about it!"

She scowled at him. "Then what?"

He hesitated, glancing down the dark, naked slope outside the tent to the sea. "One of them — Bermuda — is carrying Caitlin's baby."

She became aware that her mouth was hanging open, and closed it. "I don't understand. . . ."

"What else were we to do?" he asked irritably. "Caitlin was brain-dead after the accident. And she was two months pregnant. We don't have facilities here to raise a fetus ex utero, and none to hook up a corpse to serve as host for the next seven months. Wang had to improvise."

That corpse was my sister — Oona shook her head.

"The primary research on this was done centuries ago," Hayward said. "Goat embryos were transplanted into sheep uteri first, I believe. We've come a long way since then! Wang improvised a combination of drugs that prevented Bermuda's body from rejecting the human embryo we planted in it."

Oona felt nauseated. She couldn't believe he'd done this for the sake of

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Caitlin's baby, even if it was also his. There wasn't a fatherly bone in Gunther Hayward's athletic body: "Why would you care whether the fetus lived or died?"

He looked at her coldly in the long green light, and she knew her dislike of him was reciprocated. "What do you want me to say? My IQ is 200+. I possess an extraordinarily good physique. I am emotionally healthy. It would seem foolish to allow these characteristics to drop out of the genetic pool. You wouldn't believe anything less of me, would you?"

She ignored the sarcasm. "And what of my sister?"

"You have no right to judge." Hayward's voice was filled with contempt. "How would you know what life is like on a real frontier? There's damned hard work ahead, terraforming this planet. O.K. won't be good enough for the next generation. And Caitlin wasn't getting any younger. We made a logical decision to have a child immediately. But with Caitlin dead, it was—"

"A botched experiment?" she interrupted. "A messy embarrassment? Caitlin didn't matter. You couldn't admit your perfect plan had blown up in your face. You—"

"That's enough!" he ordered, rising from the desk and glaring at her. "You don't understand the situation at all."

"On the contrary! I understand some bottlenose dolphin is carrying my nephew."

"Niece," Hayward corrected. "But why don't you go down to the pen and take a look. Then, when you've calmed down, you can work on the translator program. The basic program we brought with us wasn't designed to deal with pregnancy. Jorge has a number of questions he'd like answered."

"I won't do it." It turned her stomach to even think of it.

"Think it over. You'll see the logic in a while." He raised the tent flap, and a rush of warm marine air greeted them. "Now, if you don't mind, this is a world waiting to be inhabited, and I have work to do."

SHE WAS still seething as she stood on the dock overlooking the dolphin pen. A teardrop-shaped lagoon had been rigged with a sluice gate at the opening to house the dwarf dolphin workers, half the size of their tursiops ancestors and bred for missions such as this. One end of the lagoon had a small appendix-shaped bulge; this had been fenced off again to served as the maternity pen for Bermuda.

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The sluice gate at the far end was open, and the other two dolphins were out on the job. Bermuda herself circled lazily just under the surface of the clear water.

Caitlin's death was a shock, but Oona never wasted time being sentimental. As for Caitlin's child — well, they should have let it die with its mother.

Even if she decided to accept the challenge her brother-in-law had given her, she'd have to spend several hours reprogramming the station's computer, which obviously wouldn't be set up for the kind of communicating she'd need to do. At best, she could expect to cobble together a truncated version of a normal interface program, and it might not be too successful.

Lingsters carried half the necessary equipment already implanted in their brains, the microchip that allowed them to access the computer as they worked. But to achieve interface with an alien species, even a tursiops, they also needed a variety of complex drugs, chemicals that altered the perceptions of human linguists in order to allow them to build some understanding of the worldview on which the alien language was built. These drugs — with very short lifetimes — were issued to a lingster as the job demanded. Oona didn't have a personal supply. Had she realized her possible need, she could have requested a kit to carry with her, but she'd hoped this would be a vacation.

She gazed at the barren planet she was stuck with for the next four months. Topographically and geologically, it seemed Earth-like. Oona could see the island's rolling hills rising from the vast, warm ocean to the spine of a mountain chain. The highest mountain displayed the characteristic bowl-shaped caldera of a volcano, long extinct, and along the coast the layered strata of gray, black, and white rock sliding into the water gave the look of collapsed walls and broken columns, almost as if civilization had once flourished on Mynah and then vanished. At one point, on the cliff face overlooking the beach a little farther down from this lagoon, a waterfall tumbled into the sea in a cloud of rainbow spray. If it were not for the total absence of anything living, she could almost imagine she were back on the Greek island of Paxos where she'd grown up. But the mountain slopes were totally bare. No olive trees swayed in the humid breeze, no flowers added their scent to the sea air, no birds lofted overhead, and no insects buzzed at her ear. Not even the lowly lichens, some

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form of which she'd seen almost everywhere in the Orion sector, grew in the rock crevices.

Yet that meant there were also no predators and no poisonous growths lurking in the warm sunshine for the unwary. Mynah encouraged humans to dream of filling her empty seas and seeding her barren hills, repairing nature's oversight.

Bermuda rolled lazily at the far side of the pen, ignoring her visitor. There was a withdrawn manner about the small dolphin, an air of self-absorption that Oona had seen in human mothers-to-be who turned their attention inward in the last weeks of their pregnancies, as if nothing in the outside world could compare with the importance of making babies. The newly formed Xenolinguists' Guild advised against female lingsters bearing children. Oona didn't mind; she'd never wanted a child.

"Gun's told you?"

She turned to see a slight, suntanned man in white shorts and nothing else standing on the dock behind her.

He advanced, hand outstretched. "Jorge Wang. Glad to have you aboard!"

"What exactly is it you want me to do here, Dr. Wang?" she asked coldly.

"Jorge, please. I know this must've come as a shock to you —" He broke off and shook his head. "There wasn't much else we could've done."

"You could've let her die in peace, and take her child with her."

He gazed at her as if he were gauging her ability to understand what he had to say. "The survival of the colony we're going to establish here is very important, do you see? There'll be no going back for them — or for us. That changes things. So we can't let even one life go without trying to save it."

"Perhaps. But where do I come into this?"

"There're no precedents to guide us. Is the fetus developing normally? It should be near term, and if there're going to be problems, we should be alerted now. I'd like to do an ultrasound, but we don't have the equipment."

"The interface a lingster achieves between languages isn't telepathy," she said. "Even if I get your computer to do the necessary translation work, I can't see what's in Bermuda's uterus!"

"True." The small man nodded. "But Joey can."

"Joey?"

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"Bermuda's mate. Cetaceans use sonar all the time. And you could get him to tell you what he 'sees.' I've done a lot of thinking about how to put the specific questions I want to ask into language a tursiops might understand."

A sudden gust of spray dampened her arm, and she glanced at the dolphin who had squirted her. The smiling face greeted her, a face loved and anthropomorphized since the days of her classical Greek ancestors. *Tursiops truncatus* was a bright animal, good at following orders and learning complicated routines, capable of a limited mode of communication with humans. The bigger *Orcinus orca* was better, which was why the guild used specially bred orcas to act as tutors for student lingsters, coaching them in perceiving a very different world matrix than a land mammal ordinarily knew. Even if she'd had all the equipment she needed, Oona wasn't convinced she'd get Bermuda and Joey to communicate what she wanted to know.

"Success seems rather unlikely to me!" she said.

"That's what life's all about, do you see? We don't always win, but we have to fight. Will you try?"

He cared deeply what happened to this child, she saw, and was embarrassed by her own coldness that made her little better than Hayward. She glanced at the quiet ocean gleaming like a mirror. Closer in, the surface splintered and flashed where the little dolphin circled, life signaling its presence in the midst of emptiness. The demands of her career had made her selfish; perhaps she'd given up more than she realized.

"I'll try — but I'm not promising anything."

Relief showed in his wide smile. "Where do you want to begin?"

"With the computer, I think."

"This way."

He led her to another canvas shed at the other end of the compound from the office. Next to it a portable generator chugged, supplying the station's electrical needs. And farther down the path worn smooth in the dark soil by the scientists' feet, Wang pointed out the hydroponics tent where the station's food supply was grown.

He lifted a flap for her to enter. "Thanks to Mynah's mild climate, canvas works admirably," he told her. "It's also cheap — a factor that endears it to the mission's accountants."

The station's mainframe was small but powerful. Wang left her alone

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while she spent an hour familiarizing herself with its operation and with the limited translation program it had come equipped with. Plugging her own link into the mainframe was no problem, but she needed to upgrade the program to cover more than a tursiops could probably understand, let alone vocalize. As she'd told Wang, interface wasn't telepathy, though it might seem like that to many people when a lingster somehow translated the incomprehensible rattlings and gurglings, the squeaks, hisses, and grunts, of an alien language. But there was an upper limit to communication that was governed by the relative intelligence of the species using it. Tursiops were bright, but it was anybody's guess if they'd be bright enough.

At least she was working. Work prevented her from brooding over her sister's death — the still unexplained accident — and the arrogance of her brother-in-law that would have to be endured for four months. How could she ever have thought she loved this man? It had been lust, pure and simple, for a man built like an ancient Greek statue. And just as cold.

Another of the team, middle-aged and heavy-jowled, came to get her at suppertime. She was surprised to find it was already dark outside, a warm velvet darkness in which clusters of huge stars hung like chandeliers, glittering fiercely. The only sound was the gentle lap of waves on the beach, the only scent the perfume of salt water. But at night, things seemed almost normal, and it was easier to forget the reality of Mynah. Again she was disturbed by the mystery of this planet, so hospitable to life, and so barren of it. Perhaps, like a figure in an old myth, Mynah had devoured her own children.

"It wasn't an accident, you know," the man said as they followed the path along the beach to where the flickering fire showed orange against black. The scientists were holding a barbecue in her honor, using the small supply of real meat that had been shuttled down from the starship with the lingster. "Your sister's death wasn't an accident."

"What was it, then?" The man had been introduced to her as the team's physicist and computer technician. His name was Brasnilov, she remembered.

He didn't answer.

"Tell me about Caitlin," she prompted.

"Not much to tell. She worked hard — long hours — but so do we all. And she had the extra reason to stay away from Hayward, we all said!" He

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laughed soundlessly, a flash of large teeth in the starlight. "But something was eating at her. Did he tell you how she died?"

"An accident with his weapon," Oona said, recalling Hayward's terse, unhelpful explanation. "She was handling his laser when it suddenly discharged."

Ivan Brasnilov snorted. "Ever wonder why she'd be playing around with a laser here? Where there's nothing to shoot at? There're no man-eating monsters on Mynah — no hostile aliens! By God — there aren't even any bugs! Caitlin was in the biolab at the time, anyway. Do you suppose the lab animals were about to attack?"

"Are you suggesting he killed her?" Oona asked slowly.

Brasnilov made the snorting noise again. "Not his style! He's a bully, not a killer."

"Then —"

"I think she killed herself," Brasnilov said. "Hard to blow a hole in your brain by accident, I'd say."

A fresh, cool breeze flapped the canvas in the hour before Mynah's sun came up. Wearing her swimsuit, Oona stepped outside the guest tent and yawned. Already the sky was turquoise streaked with rose and amethyst over a sea like an uncut emerald. But the beauty was marred by the eerie silence. She'd never thought much about how the sound of Earth — doves cooing, dogs barking, bees humming — added to one's sense of a scene's charm. Even the ugly sounds, a peacock's shriek or a mosquito's whining attack, were signs of life. Here, in this spectacular dawn, there was nothing but silence.

Beauty was an emotional factor anyway, she thought; it couldn't exist without human observers. Mynah would become more beautiful the day the colonists arrived.

She took the path to the dolphin pen and watched the female tursiops who was surfacing and submerging rhythmically, her dorsal fin describing neat circles in the quiet lagoon, occasionally blowing spray at the rapidly brightening sky. Beyond the maternity pen, she could see two other dwarf dolphins, a young male repeatedly nosing the barrier into Bermuda's pen — that had to be Joey, her mate — and an older, scarred male called Maui.

Oona hadn't slept much after Brasnilov's revelation, but there had been no time to question him further at the barbecue, with Hayward

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there. Her brother-in-law had made a great fuss out of cooking the precious meat that turned out to be sausages (Jorge Wang whispered in her ear that Mynah station was a real economy job). Taking her own life didn't seem the kind of thing Caitlin would do, especially not if she was pregnant. Unlike Oona, her sister had always wanted children.

She sat on the little dock and swung her feet over the edge. After a moment, Bermuda nosed curiously at her leg, and Oona slipped down into the still-dark water with the dolphin.

She subvocalized the coded string that opened the link. At once she was aware of the dolphin's vocalizing, high-pitched chirps and whistles, dry clicks that were picked up by the hydrophones and resolved themselves through the computer program into the simple exchanges that were all that was necessary for the level of interaction between human and tursiops that took place in her line of work.

New, the dolphin sent. *New-she?*

The transparent architecture of the dolphin's language superimposed itself on her brain; the perceived world shimmered, took on new colors.

Yes. She stroked the smooth flank. *Pod mate of old-she.*

Even on this limited, tursiops level, the exhilaration of interface flooded her senses until she overflowed the boundaries of monolingual understanding. She loved her work; it was all she had ever really wanted to do.

Good. Good. Good, Bermuda sent repeatedly. *Like she. Like new-she. Good.*

Then Bermuda insisted they play together for a while, and even though she was pregnant, the small tursiops's version of play was a lot rougher than the human was used to. Oona's legs were going to be bruised in several places when she finally climbed out. Orcas that tutored lingsters were more tolerant of the fragility of their unflippered playmates as they swam together in the Academy's safe pools. Once, she managed to run her hands over the dolphin's belly, but she wouldn't have known what it was supposed to feel like in any case.

Baby good, Bermuda sent. *Small. Good.*

A normal tursiops calf weighed about sixteen kilograms at birth, Oona knew. Even a dwarf would be in the region of eight or nine — twice the size of a human baby. No wonder Bermuda thought the fetus was small.

But is she O.K.?

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A wall of seawater raced away from the shaken barrier, tossing Oona like a cork.

Like baby. Good. Good, Bermuda sent emphatically.

The tursiops's emotion for the fetus she carried was infectious. Oona found herself thinking warm thoughts — life's constant struggle to give birth to more life, a rich inheritance of genes handed down over and over. They swam together to the barrier that separated the maternity pen from the larger pen. Oona reached a hand toward it, to rest for a moment and catch her breath.

The barrier vibrated suddenly with the force of a male hurling himself against it.

"What the —!"

Bad Joey. Joey not like, Bermuda sent.

What doesn't he like, Bermuda! Doesn't Joey like new-she!

A wall of seawater raced away from the shaken barrier, tossing Oona like a cork. She struggled to keep her balance, clutching Bermuda's flipper for support. Joey crashed repeatedly into the barrier as if he would shatter it.

Not like baby, Bermuda sent.

"Oh yes! I imagine he's quite jealous," Jorge Wang said later, as Oona dried herself off with a towel in hot sunshine at the primary's zenith.

There was a quiet, unhurried manner about the small man that Oona liked very much. He stood placidly on the little dock, feeding the tursiops their daily ration of food grown in the hydroponics tent. It didn't look much like fish, she thought, but the tursiops didn't complain. Until the seas could be stocked, this would be necessary, and dwarf species required less of a scarce commodity to survive. The only sounds were the dolphins' excited cries and the splash of water. Beyond them stretched the vast silence of the planet, the naked hills and valleys, the empty streams of crystal water.

"They were mated, do you see, soon after we arrived," Wang said. "But the calf had something wrong with it, and it died. And Bermuda never conceived again."

"Do you think he'd really hurt Bermuda? Is that why she's separated from the other two?"

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"Well, that's a normal precaution — you saw how roughly they play! —But it's best to be safe."

"Why not use Maui for the sonar scan?"

"He's too old — unreliable."

"How're we going to get Joey to cooperate?"

Wang scuffed bare toes in the black volcanic sand. "That's your department, Lingster."

She was aware of a shadow falling on her sunburned shoulders, and turned to find her brother-in-law watching them.

"Any progress yet?" Hayward asked. "Or can't you work that quickly?"

"Certainly!" she snapped. "Bermuda and I had quite a conversation. She likes me. She likes being a surrogate mother. She likes the baby. The baby's fine. And she wants to keep it."

She couldn't help adding the last just to see his reaction; the man had no sense of humor. As she expected, he took the bait.

"Impossible! A human child's not physically suited for such an environment. Besides, we —" He broke off, belatedly realizing she'd been making fun of him. "I know you don't think I'll be a proper father to this child, but I assure you I'll do everything necessary."

"Like teaching her calculus before she can walk? Or reciting the periodic tables over her to put her to sleep at night? After all, she *is* going to be a genius, isn't she?"

His face was stony. "I'll do that and more. I won't neglect the ordinary things you prize so highly. I'll teach her to handle a fishing rod — and a laser. I'll teach her to ride a bike and play chess. I'll —"

"I'm convinced you'll educate her adequately!" Oona said. "But are you capable of loving her?"

"Are you?" he challenged. "I haven't heard you offering to stay and raise her. What gives you the right to feel superior to me, Lingster?"

Oona was silent. She'd never thought much about giving up childbearing for the sake of her career as a lingster. For one thing, she'd never found a man worth having a child for. But all this baby had for a mother right now was an amiable bottlenose dolphin.

She shook the mood off and went up to work with the computer.

It took a lot of coaxing to persuade Joey to cooperate. At first he didn't react well to having Oona swim with him, to get to know him. Wang had

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to watch him all the time, once or twice even prodding him with the stunner. Since these dolphins were born and bred in captivity and used to working with humans, Joey's hostility had only one ground: Bermuda's pregnancy.

She knew Joey could be useful to them, if only he would consent, and if he could control his jealousy long enough to learn what he had to do.

She worked long hours in the days that followed, swimming with Joey in the mornings, then working with the computer in the afternoons while the two male dolphins accompanied the scientists in their boat, off on some underwater exploration or other. Oona wasn't interested enough to ask what it was they did. The sound of the outboard puttering over the bay meant only that Hayward was away for the rest of the daylight period, and she could get on with her work undisturbed.

Ivan Brasnilov puffed beside her, bent over the workbench where he was assembling a simplified microchip copy of the one permanently implanted in Oona's brain. He sounded as if he'd been running a marathon, but Oona had learned it was only a sign of concentration.

Oona saved the work she'd been doing on the computer and switched off the monitor, her eyes tired from staring at the screen. She leaned back on the folding canvas chair — all the furnishings of the station were of the inexpensive youth-camp variety — and gazed at the heavy-jowled man.

"I want to talk about my sister."

Brasnilov delicately lifted a pair of tweezers from the bench. "She was sexy — witty — hot-tempered —"

"Comes from the combination of Greek and Irish blood!"

"So what else is there to talk about?"

"What was Caitlin working on before she died? I don't believe anyone ever told me."

"She was a virologist. She was researching the viruses in Mynah's soil."

"And?"

"No 'and,'" he said. "That's all. Funny planet! No life — just viruses."

"Viruses aren't alive?"

He shook his head. "Nonorganic. They're the smallest infectious agents — capable of replicating themselves only inside plant or animal cells."

"In other words, they're dead, but they need life to reproduce?"

He nodded.

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"They must be awfully frustrated here, then!" she said. "How do you research viruses?"

Brasnilov laid the tweezers back on the table and took up a small laser. "Don't they teach lingsters anything about science? You experiment with them, of course!"

She persisted. "On what?"

"What do you think? We came with the full complement of lab animals — a dozen varieties of spiders."

"*Spiders!*"

"Well, maybe that was another of the economy measures," he said. "But you can tell a lot from the way the little guys spin their webs."

Oona shuddered. "Sounds repulsive."

He grinned up at her. "You should go visit the spiders sometime. They're in the tent next door. Maybe they're lonely without your sister."

"Why do you think she'd kill herself?"

Brasnilov shrugged. "Obvious, isn't it?"

"Not to me!"

Brasnilov blew out a great breath. "There. That just might work. Now it's Jorge's turn to implant this little pearl in that great ugly-tempered oyster of his!"

Later she donned a surgical gown and mask and assisted Jorge with Joey. The small man's slender fingers moved swiftly over the sleeping dolphin's skull, suturing the microchip link in place just under the skin. Oona watched, her mind elsewhere. It made no sense that Caitlin would kill herself because she was pregnant. When they were kids on Paxos, Oona went snorkeling and spelunking, but Caitlin was the one who always played with dolls.

"Now, if we're lucky and everything works as it should," Brasnilov said afterward," we should get some pictures on our computer screen of what the dolphin sees by his sonar inside Bermuda. Not as good as a sonogram taken with proper equipment, of course. But useful."

"Not so fast!" Wang said. "The patient needs to recover from the stress of surgery first."

"How long?"

"Two — three days."

Oona spent the time reading through her sister's lab notes and visiting the biolab. Brasnilov's taunt haunted her; the notes were too technical and

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made little sense. The spiders still spun busily in their glass boxes. There were detailed drawings of their webs in Caitlin's notes.

Her sister had loved every living thing, babies and spiders both. She'd devoted her life to their welfare. And by extension, the life of the new colony depended on her work, too. Her own life, Oona thought, was barren by contrast, like the planet itself. No matter how important her work might be, she would have no one to inherit its riches. Perhaps, like beauty, life had to shared.

When Hayward was off on an all-day expedition to a neighboring island, she used the Net to call the guild.

Pregnancy is discouraged, the reply said, *because it interferes with the mother's ability to achieve interface. Yet child raising is not. . . .*

There was more, but she barely scanned it. Almost immediately, she regretted the sentimental impulse that had caused the query. She had other things to do with her life, and she was quite content.

Three days later Wang pronounced Joey ready for work, and they lifted the barrier between the main pen and the maternity pen.

The male tursiops sulked in his own quarters for perhaps half an hour, though it was obvious he'd noticed the raised barrier.

Come on, Joey! she coaxed. *See Bermuda. See baby. Help new-she.*

Joey ignored her.

"Perhaps I should get in with him?" she wondered.

Wang vetoed the idea. "Too dangerous!"

As if to prove him right, Joey made a sudden dash through the barrier, leaving a boiling wake in the main pen. For a moment, Oona thought that despite all her coaching and preparing of the male dolphin, he was going to kill his mate. But Bermuda floated, apparently unconcerned, and Joey pulled up short a few centimeters away. He nudged gently at her flanks.

"Getting a signal now," Brasnilov called from a little ways down the beach, away from the spray, where the mainframe's large monitor had been temporarily set up on an upturned crate. Beside it the smaller monitor from Hayward's office recorded the fetus's vital signs. Gunther Hayward hunkered down close to the big screen to see the sonogram of his unborn daughter. The other members of the team crowded behind him; nobody was working today.

Joey swam in lazy circles about Bermuda. The danger seemed to have passed enough that Oona felt comfortable leaving the maternity pen to

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look at the computer screen, too. She stared at the first images of her niece in the dolphin's womb.

It was like trying to find an amoeba in mud, or like the photos sent back by robot subs investigating deepwater wrecks — tantalizing, suggestive, ultimately elusive. Shadowy, fluid shapes came suddenly swimming up out of the murk — the teasing suggestion of a spine — then dissolved again. Then a black smear pulsed, and she realized it was the heart. An electrode attached to Bermuda's body picked up the three-beat pony gallop of the baby's heart, punctuated by an occasional "pop" that Wang identified as a hiccup.

Oona's throat constricted, and tears filled her eyes. She wiped them away quickly.

"There's the head," Brasnilov said. "And there're the lungs!"

Would an ultrasound have been clearer? she wondered. Undoubtedly, but just as difficult for a nonspecialist to interpret.

"Brain scan showing normal!" Wang said, pointing to the readings of the exterior EEG on the smaller monitor.

A shimmer ran across the indistinct image on the large screen; Bermuda was rolling under her mate's probing beak.

"Damn! Lost the picture," Brasnilov said.

"Do something!" Hayward ordered.

It came back suddenly before the computer tech could do anything, a different view but just as shadowy.

"Tell him to concentrate on the fetus's abdominal cavity," Wang said.

She framed the words carefully in her mind, choosing terms a tursiops might understand, then sending them cautiously over the link. They were straining the limits of the tursiops translation program. Would Joey respond to the terminology she'd added?

Apparently he did.

"All major organs looking good!" Wang said. "See the kidneys? And there's the liver."

The screen blanked again.

"Shit!" Hayward smacked his fist against the side of the monitor.

Oona glanced back at the maternity pen and saw Joey blowing spray near the open gate.

Joey! Help new-she. See baby, she pleaded.

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The male lifted one eye out of the water and looked in her direction for a moment.

New-she not like baby, he sent.

What! Of course I like baby! She stared at him uneasily. *What do you mean!*

Wang and Brasnilov were arguing over measurements like a pair of anxious midwives. She could hear their voices behind her, and Hayward's deeper rumble issuing commands.

"Count the number of fingertips on each hand! We mustn't forget details."

"Goddamn, Gun! We don't have resolution like that!"

New-she not like baby, the tursiops insisted.

Had something gone wrong? If only this had been an orca she was dealing with, it would've been easier. *Is baby sick?*

Not sick. Baby good. New-she not like, he sent.

Then Bermuda's voice broke in, *Good baby. Good baby. Good baby.*

Joey cut the picture-taking event short by heading back into the bigger pen and refusing to do any more.

"We got enough," Wang said. "It was a success! I saw lungs — heart —kidneys — liver — stomach, too. All about the right size, as far as I could tell. She's going to be all right!"

"This calls for champagne!" Hayward said jubilantly. "But we don't have any. We'll have to settle for some of that sour mash Moriyuki makes over in hydroponics."

GLASS IN hand, Oona stared moodily at the spider drawings: Family Araneidae, orb weavers.

The notebook brimmed with her sister's neat sketches of webs. One series was devoted to drawings of the geometric orbs of the silver argiope over a period of weeks. The webs seemed to deteriorate as time progressed, with the last illustrations resembling tangled balls of string rather than the perfect spiral and hub constructions that had occurred earlier. There was a clue here somewhere, Oona was certain, to her sister's suicide. Something she'd discovered while working in this lab had driven Caitlin to despair. She refilled the glass with ouzo she'd brought for her sister. Under other circumstances, she would never consider drinking while on the job.

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In the two weeks since the tursiops had performed his sonar scan of Caitlin's baby, Oona had tried repeatedly to get him to elaborate on his impressions of the human fetus. If it was growing normally and was healthy, why did he think she wouldn't like it? But he stubbornly refused to answer her questions, limiting his responses to work situations, the regular exchange of information he shared with the scientists. And Bermuda wasn't much better, happily insisting the baby was good, good, good.

Why look for trouble? The shuttle would be here in a matter of weeks. She'd leave Hayward to learn how to be a father, and get on with her career. She'd never yearned for a child anyway, especially not one as perfect in every respect as her brother-in-law expected this one to be.

A page caught her eye, sketches of two spiders on separate scraps of paper, pasted side by side. The first was dated 12 October '29, and must have been made soon after the team arrived on Mynah. The argiope's parts were carefully drawn and labeled neatly in Caitlin's hand. Some parts were as alien to Oona as any being from another planet might possess: *chelicera, pedipalpi.* But others, such as the many-jointed legs with their oddly familiar names — *femur, patella, tibia, metatarsus, tarsus* — were a disquieting reminder of how much all life that originated on Earth had in common.

The second drawing was crude and splotched with water stains. It appeared unfinished, as if Caitlin had tired of the work of meticulously recording the many parts of the eight legs, leaving them stumpy and unfinished, misshapen. Oona studed it with growing fear. There were tiny holes where the pen Caitlin used to label the drawing had been pushed so hard it penetrated the paper. This one was dated 17 July '32, eight months ago, just about the time Caitlin must have known for certain she was pregnant.

The watermarks, Oona realized, were tearstains.

Something was terribly wrong. Something so bad Caitlin couldn't tell her husband about it.

"There you are!" Jorge Wang's head appeared in the opening to the biolab tent, his cheeks bright red and glazed with sweat. "Come quickly! Bermuda's in labor."

"Jorge!" she said. "What kind of marriage did my sister have with Hayward?"

"What? Why worry about that now? We need you!"

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"Please. I have to know."

"Well — Gun's not a demonstrative type," Wang said. "And he's no angel. But I think they loved each other. Hard for you to believe, do you see? They argued a lot, but they were really looking forward to being parents. First of the new colony, she used to say. Now will you come?"

Oona dropped the notebooks back into the desk drawer where she'd found them, and ran outside after Wang.

"What can I do? I don't know anything about human parturition, let along delphine!"

"In the normal state, two other dolphins — the aunties — support the mother while she gives birth, nudging her and her calf to the surface so they can breathe," Wang said. He was panting as they turned down the path to the dolphin pen. "But Maui's not too bright, and we can't trust Joey! We'll have to do it."

There *couldn't* be anything wrong with the baby. She was just tired — never much of a scientist — too imaginative —

And if there were, why hadn't Caitlin simply aborted and tried again?

The bizarre spider drawings refused to let her go.

She stripped off her outer clothes as she ran, kicking the sandals away when she reached the dock. Then she forgot everything in the excitement. Ivan Brasnilov was already waist-deep in the water, his big hands caressing the tursiops as he murmured encouragement. In the knot of spectators gathered to witness the event, she saw her brother-in-law, his eyes shining as if he'd been drinking. Wang threw himself into the water, and Oona followed.

Bermuda seemed both heavier and slipperier than Oona remembered, and she was having trouble. It was difficult to keep control of the rolling, thrashing body. Oona's hands slipped off the flippers she'd grasped, and she was knocked off-balance by the dolphin's bony beak. Several times Bermuda dragged Oona underwater with her as she plunged.

"How's the fetal heart rate?" Wang was yelling when she surfaced.

She shook the water off her face and hung on to the tursiops desperately.

"Lost the signal!" Brasnilov yelled back. "Damn electrode came unglued!"

"Get it back on!" Hayward ordered from the dock. His voice was high with nervousness. "We have to do this right!"

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"*You* try it!" Wang muttered, and got a mouthful of seawater as Bermuda plunged again.

The dolphin was too agitated to respond to Oona's questions.

Oona's ears were full of water, distorting sound, and it seemed that with the altered sound came an altering of reality. Time seemed to stretch out slowly like the silk issuing from a spider's spinnerets. She hung in a bright, sterile web of sea and sunlight, while the dolphin rose and fell in slow motion on the midwives' arms, giving birth to something that should not have been. Oona was aware of her brother-in-law on the dock, cheering them on. He thought this child was his, a perfect reproduction of his superior genes, and the dolphins had agreed the child was good.

But Caitlin had known the child was Mynah's, and she'd tried to kill them both.

And then, suddenly, it was all over. The silence was pierced by a newborn's thin cry.

"Get it up — out of the water!" Wang said, coughing as he emerged from under Bermuda. "Grab the legs — hold it upside down so the fluid drains out of its lungs!"

Timeless advice. Millions of human midwives over the centuries had seized billions of babies by the legs and hoisted them triumphantly aloft. Oona's hands remained at her side. Brasnilov, who'd caught the little body as it emerged, stood empty-handed, openmouthed and motionless.

"Get ahold of it! What're you waiting for?" Hayward bellowed.

"What the hell—?" Wang dove back under the water to scrabble for the child, who was sinking.

The water was stained red with Bermuda's blood. Beyond the barrier, Joey squeaked alarm. Wang came back up, his suntanned face registering shock. The child was cradled in his arms.

"Well? Upside down, man! Upside down!" Hayward ordered, demonstrating with agitated movements of his hands.

Without a word, the small man held the baby with its head down, his hands grasped around its perfect trunk. The twisted cord of the umbilical trailed across his wrist to the floating bloody mass of the afterbirth.

Baby good, but new-she not like, Joey had warned.

Where the arms and legs should have emerged from the tiny trunk were only stunted, flattened growths that resembled flippers.

The baby began to wail.

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Oona looked away in horror and saw her brother-in-law frozen on the dock, his hands still raised in his last gesture. His face contorted as if he were trying to spit out something painful. His mouth moved soundlessly, and for a moment she thought she saw tears in his eyes.

Then he snapped out of his shock. "Drown it."

"*What?*"

"I said drown it. It'll be a moron anyway." Hayward's voice was expressionless. He turned away and left the dock.

"Bastard!" she screamed at his departing back, and found that she couldn't control her shaking. *O.K. won't be good enough* — But she kept her eyes averted from the shocking thing that was Mynah's baby.

"That's probably good advice, though it sounds cruel," Brasnilov said softly. "Goddamn it anyway! There're just six men on this station. How could we take care of something like that?"

Wang stared down at the monstrosity. "How could it have happened? The host mother has no part in the genetic makeup of the fetus —"

She swallowed down tears. "Something — a virus — in Mynah's soil causes birth defects. Caitlin saw it in the spiders she exposed to the soil. They lost the ability to spin. Then their offspring began displaying horrible mutations. It's why she tried to kill herself and the child."

"Bermuda's calf," Brasnilov said. "Remember that? It was a funny-looking thing, and we said it was a good job it died." He clenched his fists. "Damn virus has been waiting for us all this time — it needs life to replicate itself, and it chooses the unborn!"

"The colonists who're coming here —," Wang began slowly.

"Will be doomed as soon as they try to reproduce," Brasnilov finished for him.

The tursiops nudged at Oona's legs. *Good baby!* she sent. *Small! New-she like small baby!*

If there were any meaning in the universe, a virus wouldn't win over life. But apparently a deformed child or a doomed colony meant nothing in the vast scheme of things. Mynah was a planet that devoured life.

Oona took the child out of Wang's arms, and forced herself to look at it, red-faced and squalling now, the flippers waving angrily at the world. It would be a kindness to drown it, really. How could it ever survive, in any case? These men weren't prepared to nurse it, and it was too human to live with the dolphins. Then its eyes opened and it gazed up at her, a look

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full of trust and promises, and she knew Hayward was wrong.

"Give it to me," Brasnilov said quietly. "I'll take it out in the boat —"

She clutched the child to her breast. "The EEG —"

"Was normal, yes," Wang said. "But you couldn't take care of it, anyway. How could you — a lingster — drag a kid like this from world to world?"

She saw that he was crying.

The rest of the guild's reply to her query came into her mind. The younger a child started training, the better, while the natural "language window" remained open. Hands weren't required to achieve alien interface, only a good brain, and Hayward had seen to that. This child, not quite human, might have much to offer.

New-she like baby! Bermuda queried anxiously.

Even one life saved from the jaws of the uncaring universe had to be worth something. Oona looked down into the alert eyes of her niece.

New-she like baby, she replied.

— For Shannon Rae

"Yes, this certainly is a highly polluted piece of air."

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Renato Pestriniero is an Italian writer who has had many stories and novels published in Italy. He has written several fantasy tales set in his native Venice; here is a superior example, brought to our attention and translated by Kim Stanley Robinson.

Espree

By Renato Pestriniero

IF I WERE a woman they'd call me a bag lady. As it is I'm just a bum.

Bag ladies have their shopping bags, their old baby carriages; I've got an old mailman's cart, which has two little wheels set above the main ones, to help get it over the bridges. Very useful, as Venice is sewn together with bridges. Four hundred bridges. I sleep under them. I spend my days strolling the city, in search of a patch of sun. An air shaft in winter, a breeze in summer. I don't ask people for anything. If someone gives me a coin, I usually thank them. I may not look like much on the outside — but inside a cathedral couldn't hold me.

I can identify every bridge in Venice in the pitch dark, just by the feel of the stones, by the sounds and smells coming from the walls around it and the canal under it. Water running under stone, in an endless ebb and flow, like the great breath of time. I know my town completely, entirely. I know the town like a lover knows his woman. I can say that only now.

* * *

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I was born in Venice, but when I was twenty years old I abandoned it without regret. From that, everything follows.

I met Valeria when I was nineteen, on the last night of carnival. Our faces were hidden by the masks, but our voices and what we said to each other inspired us to leave the party and retire to a small terrace overlooking the Rio dei Medicanti. The night was unusually bright: moonshine and canal lights made it possible to see as far as the Church of John and Paul.

"Shadows play with time," Valeria said.

The lagoon was before us, San Michele Island a dark spot on it. I looked at Valeria, hesitant, attracted. I hadn't understood what she meant, but something stirred deep in me, something dozing in a hidden corner, awakened by a precise goad. "What do you mean?" I asked.

She pointed down the canal, where it vanished in an ancient, liquid whispering. "Shadows hide the cement and the TV antennas. They hide the motors on the boats, the clothes of the people walking by. See what I mean?"

I looked at her again. The mystery created by the mask increased unbearably. "Yes," I said. "I think so. We can't see anything that tells us when we're living. This could be centuries ago—"

"Look at the dark cavern on the right," Valeria said, interrupting me. "It's the old boatyard, looking just as it always has. See? Somebody's moving. Boatmen, launching a gondola."

It was Canaletto's painting of the place, done in 1700. Valeria had stirred the shadows, and now I saw it. The rugs that in the painting hang out of the windows and from the roof terraces fluttered sluggishly before me. I heard the tiny splashes of mice diving into the canal. Standing there staring silently down the dark water street, I forgot the party, barely heard the music and laughter.

The roar of a motorboat on the lagoon brought me back.

"That was well said," I told Valeria. "But it shouldn't have been you who said it."

"Why not?" she asked, looking amused.

"This is my city. It should have been I who unveiled its magic possibilities. You're from Milano, right? There's no magic there."

"A Milanese can like Canaletto, don't you agree?"

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I smiled. "Of course. But you didn't just remind me of the painting; you brought it back."

Valeria shrugged. "Beauty is everywhere. You only have to look."

I thought, you have to know how to see. I decided I wanted to know her.

The party lasted all night. At dawn, everyone was ready to take off the masks.

"Valeria? Will you take off masks with me?"

She didn't answer. Through the two holes in the mask, I saw her eyes, looking into mine. I hadn't yet been able to ascertain their color: they were deep, with the kind of sudden reflections you see in water. Her hand rested on mine, and I was sure I was living a crucial moment of my life.

Many of the maskers had already wandered off and gotten lost in the labyrinth of narrow streets, in small groups or paired, every one of them smoldering to discover the face of the new partner, excited at the prospect of forbidden fruit.

"Let's go," I said. "I want to show you something. You'll like it."

I took her by the hand, and we ran through the house. Our images flashed at our sides in hallways lined with silver mirrors, clouded by salt and time. Valeria was laughing, and anticipation took my breath away. I realized the city was sharing the night with us. We walked down narrow, dark alleys, passing shadows that could have been bodies embracing or phantoms created by the town. The Abbazia Bridge echoed under our steps, sound rebounding all over the canal-ringed square. We passed through the arcade and walked down the Fondamenta della Misericordia.

The first gray of dawn appeared in the east. We stopped at the end of the Fondamenta, our slightest sound echoing in the watery silence. Valeria leaned in the hollow of a doorway and rested for a long time, looking at me through the holes in her mask.

Then she began to raise the mask, slowly. The gesture struck me more than anything ever had; in its simplicity was the essence of giving, of showing oneself. It was a total offer.

I first saw her lips, which were full and ironical. Strong cheekbones were reddened by the mask. Her eyes kept the promise; deep and clear, full of an intensity I thought I would never be able to do without, ever again.

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I, too, raised my mask, without thinking of how I might look to her. It was just what I had to do to be able to kiss her.

In my memory the months after that all overlap. I stayed with Valeria during her half year in Venice, then followed her to Milano. My studies were put aside so I could go; I took an opportunity in her father's company. I married Valeria, settled in Milano. The studies were never resumed. As time passed, the memory of Venice grew faint. Little by little, it became something like the image formed of it by those who don't live there: a dream city, perfect for spending a romantic weekend or holiday. After which one can return to the real world, with its activity and speed, its crowds, its smog, all the things that people renounce fiercely but can never give up.

ABOUT TWENTY years ago I got the chance to return to Venice, and stay for an extended period. By that time I was the sales manager of my father-in-law's company, and my presence was needed for negotiating and signing a contract that would open up new markets in the east. As the date of my trip to Venice approached, I felt my curiosity changing into an urgent need to see all the old places, to hear again all the forgotten silences.

The day came. From the air, Marco Polo Airport looked like a gray raft set adrift. It was mid-February; everything was brown, brick red, ocher, sienna, all muted as if seen through mist. The hotel in the Campo San Angelo was a welcome oasis of warmth and discreet bustle.

The days followed one after another, filled with engagements, discussions, phone and telex messages. Meanwhile the city stayed removed from all that, wrapped in frozen fog.

The business engagements thinned as the various points of the contract were discussed and agreed on. Eventually the final meeting to sign the contract took place, in a hall of the Hotel Danieli — part of the old Danieli, not the awful addition they put up a few years back.

It was the last day of February. When the meeting ended, someone suggested that we finish our time in Venice by taking part in the last night of carnival. It was an opportunity not to be missed, he said; and most of the group agreed. I phoned Valeria and told her I would be delayed coming home, and joined them.

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All through the day the streets became noisier, more filled with maskers. By the time evening arrived, Venice was a kaleidoscope, a chromatic whirl, a frenzy of movement. It was impossible not to become part of it. I remember the night as a vague sequence of images overlapping and intersecting without chronological order: glasses passing from one hand to the next, dizziness, dancing in a maze of narrow streets.

My memory of that night clears only near dawn. I found myself walking along a canal. It was quiet. I had a bad headache, and was thirsty. My mask pressed on my face like a piece of armor; I pulled it off.

Fog had seeped in, and the world was reduced to the few meters around me: the canal, a small walkway. Probably it had not been a good idea to stay for carnival. I should have been in Milano by now, with Valeria and the children. I smiled to think what Valeria would say if she saw me in such a state, and sat down on the stone bank of the canal.

"Hello!"

A girl's voice, near me. I turned abruptly. She was dressed in a *bautta*, a Venetian domino, her face hidden by the characteristic white mask.

"Hello," I answered. I was disturbed; I didn't know what to say. I glanced around; fog made it seem like we were in a room.

"Maybe you know where we are," I said at last. "I've lost my group, and I've got to get back to a hotel in Campo San Angelo."

"Of course I know where we are, my charming Milanese," said the girl in a mocking voice. It was a pleasant voice, warm and exquisitely feminine. The mask was surely hiding a face to match the voice.... Suddenly I was seized by a strong sense of déjà vu, and it seemed I was again on a terrace over the Rio dei Mendicanti during a party, a last night of carnival many years gone.

"Valeria," I heard myself whisper.

"My name is not Valeria," the girl said. "Let's see if you can guess correctly."

"Well . . . it's difficult." Everything was changing; the exhaustion and boredom and uneasiness I had been filled with moments before were vanishing, replaced by the sense of excitement you feel when something happens for the first time. Memories of my childhood gusted through me with the fog, overwhelming me; among them was the face of a girl in a Caniff drawing, a girl I had wanted to meet. "Espree," I heard myself say. I laughed. "Do you mind if I call you Espree?"

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"But that's my name!" the girl exclaimed. "How did you guess?"

A joke. The girl liked me, and she was still in the spirit of carnival. I went along with it. "I've been following you since yesterday evening, my mysterious spirit, but you slipped away."

"And then I found you. Can I help you find your hotel?"

"It could be dangerous, don't you think? This is a strange night; anything could happen."

"It's carnival; anything *must* happen."

And despite the fact we were playing a game, those words, in that voice, increased my excitement. Unforeseen, adventurous — forbidden —"

"It's a pity I couldn't have met you before, Espree."

"Dawn is still some time away, and fog will hold it off longer."

"Where are we now?"

"Near Corte dell'Albero."

"Corte dell'Albero. Yes, I remember it. A fountain. When I was a kid, I splashed its water onto people passing by. I wonder if it's still there. I'd like to see it again. The water was cold. In summer, too."

Espree put her hand lightly to my mouth. "Listen," she whispered. I could just hear the sound of falling water, coming out of the fog. Suddenly I felt thirsty again. "Let's go," I said to her. "Let's go and drink."

I took her by the hand, and the contact thrilled me. I drew her nearer, but she pushed me away — "You can't," she said, laughing. "Masks mustn't come off until dawn."

"I've taken off mine," I pointed out, and heard my breath rasp.

"So much the worse for you," replied the mask, and she ran away and disappeared into the fog.

"Wait! Don't go Espree! Wait for me!" I tried to follow her. A water sound was nearer and nearer. Then the fountain I remembered so well was before me, vague in the fog.

Espree was there, leaning against the coping, waiting for me.

I drank long drafts of cold water, as if it were a precious liqueur.

"Don't you want to drink?" I asked the girl.

She shook her head. "Did you think I had gone away?"

"Well — it's carnival. People play cruel tricks."

"Would it have displeased you?"

I leaned my hands on her shoulders, thin under the black cloak, and for the first time I tried to look at her eyes through the holes in the mask.

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My hands felt the solidity of her body, and her breath steamed in the night, mingling with the fog.

"Yes," I said. "It would have displeased me very much. I would like to stop time . . . but maybe . . . maybe it has already happened. Listen — no sound around us — where has everybody gone? There's only the fountain." The feeling of displacement captured me completely. Visions of the past, when Venice was my home, filled me; it was like time had leaped back.

"Come," Espree said. She took me by the hand and led me along streets I didn't recognize; but a window or a broken column or a well were enough to make them homey places to me, comfortable. Espree led me by the hand, and it was like going backward in time, to recover the best years, the years I had squandered by following a mirage.

The dawn continued to hold off. We slipped into a dark alley, and I looked around, recognizing it. It seemed no time at all had passed since Espree had appeared on the canalside next to me. "Why did you lead me here?" I said, astonished. Suspiciously: "Who are you, really? You know me — maybe we played together when we were kids, and now you recognize me. . . ."

A subdued laugh came from behind the white mask.

"Take that off; I want to see you!" I said. "Take it off or I will!"

"No!" The girl withdrew, her hands covering her masked face. "No, you can't. Later. Look — do you remember?"

Before us, vague in the fog, a marble spiral curled into the sky, flanked by a sequence of small arches. An apparition out of memory, frightening, poignant. My best friend, Fabio, and I had secretly climbed to this small tower's top, years and years ago. It was one of those experiences that etch themselves on the memory and condition the life that follows, an endless source of sensations and ideas. And the more time passes, the richer they become.

"Yes," I said. "I remember it as if it happened yesterday."

"Would you like to do it again?"

"It would be wonderful. But it's impossible — you can't repeat things like that. I was sixteen years old! Everything was different then, lived with a different heart, different eyes."

But it wasn't true — because a few moments later I was up there again, over the roofs that vanished in the fog. From that height one could see, to the east, the diffuse light of dawn. Memories filled me. Espree was at my

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side, a creature of the fog, and I was embedded in the folds of time.

"I remember a campanile with a clock that struck on the hour," I said in a low voice, as if in a church. "I remember it frightened Fabio and me with its sudden stroke."

And when the clang of the clock bell came out of the fog, I was not surprised. I smiled at Espree and nodded. "We couldn't leave that out."

WE PARTED at daybreak, among a mosaic of colored paper that covered the street like a carpet. Fog was melting the first light of dawn. When Espree told me she had to go, I didn't try to take her mask off. I didn't want to.

"When can I see you again?" I asked.

"I'm always here, but it's difficult to find me."

"Next carnival I'll search for you. I'll wear the same mask."

"Me, too," she said.

The following year I found a pretext to leave Milano and travel back to Venice. I took a room in the same hotel in Campo San Angelo. Late in the evening I went out in my mask and wandered the streets, searching for a woman in a *bautta*. I saw a lot of them, but I could feel that they weren't Espree.

I didn't find her until the last night of carnival. I saw the *bautta* from a distance, and immediately felt sure it was her.

That night we repeated the magic wandering, along the streets of a world I had abandoned.

And slowly, implacably, that world pulled me back. Pulled me back with the slap of water on stone, the creaking of the gulls, the mullioned windows suspended in the fog.

The yearly rendezvous in Venice became a necessity. The attraction of it began to fill my entire year, tugging at me through the long months. Pulling me back.

In the end, it was a force I couldn't resist. And so one day, after the dawn had erased carnival's last night, I didn't catch the usual 10:40 plane to Milano. I couldn't live in that world anymore; it wasn't mine, even if

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it was the real world. Even if it was the world of Valeria and the children.

I had to make a choice; and that day I didn't go to the airport. I collected what I needed to make a small carriage, scavenging in construction sites and dumpsters, putting an old mailbag onto two wheels taken from an abandoned baby carriage. I threw my suitcases away. In my new bag I put only the carnival mask, and a few small essentials. I threw my wallet and all it contained — my identification, my credit cards — into a canal. And to the world at large, I disappeared.

At first, people gave me nothing, because the suit I wore wasn't what you'd see on a tramp. But after a few months, people started to put some small change in my hand, even though I never asked.

Now I look different. I'm another man. In fact, one day some years ago, I saw Valeria here in Venice. She didn't look at me any longer than you usually look at a tramp.

I know I caused great sorrow to her and the children, but the city snared me, and there is no escape. Perhaps the city is taking revenge on me, for not loving it enough in the first place; on the other hand, perhaps it is taking pity on me, saving me from a gray life, taking me back to the world I left by accident. Or perhaps it is jealous of the woman who took me away, and provided another to lure me back.

I don't know. In any case, I'm living in the city and will never leave, and now I know every particular of its body, like a lover knows his woman; and when carnival comes, Espree always appears, and leads me to places both ancient and new.

All my possessions are in my carriage. Recently I added two more wheels to the front side, to make it easier to get over the four hundred bridges of the city, because a lot of years have passed, and it's getting hard to get around. I'd like to have Espree with me all the time, but like many women, she makes herself desirable by keeping her distance; and only during the last night of carnival does she appear, to take me with her into the fog of time.

— translated from the Italian by
RENATO PESTRINIERO and
KIM STANLEY ROBINSON

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In Ray Aldridge's latest tale for F&SF we once again enter a world in which the interaction between man and technology is of prime importance. "Chump Change" limns a portrait of a dangerous future in which only the clever survive and where it doesn't do to "have a chip on your shoulder."

Chump Change

By Ray Aldridge

THE SLITTER WHINED against his throat. Bilobi felt the painless parting of his skin, then a line of flowing warmth. Heat pooled in the hollow of his throat, and the scent of his blood came to him.

"Be still, breakerboy," the ganger whispered. "Don't want any more of your blood, but easy to make mistake, so?"

The ganger's free hand fumbled through Bilobi's pockets, flipped out the pin knife, the glass wire, the dazzlebombs — essential tools, amulets against the other harsh men who roamed the robot dump. Bilobi held himself very still, thinking: *This will pass. This is nothing. I've lived through worse; I'll live through this.* After a while he began to believe.

A million metal bodies lay in shining drifts, piled high. Occasionally an arm or leg rattled — the last spasm of a not-quite-dead power cell. Otherwise the dump was silent. His gaze drifted up the high steel wall that encircled the dump, sealing it safely away from the rest of the world. And imprisoning the men who scratched a living from those dangerous

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corpses. No inspectors stood in the official observation blister today. Whatever happened next, no one would see. He stopped himself from smiling.

The ganger jerked at the buckle of Bilobi's work harness, and his tool rack crashed to the ground. The ganger pushed; Bilobi tripped over a rusty torso and fell, sprawling. He rolled over, looked up.

The ganger was thin, bald, with black-dyed skin and white eyes. A pattern of pale green whorls and triangles marked his hollow cheeks. Over the gang tattoos were shiny pink diagonal slashes, two on each cheek. The scars were artfully framed by new tattoos. *A former ganger,* Bilobi thought, *cut loose and proud of it.*

"We talk, breakerboy," the ex-ganger said. He gestured with the slitter, and it hummed. "Lie quiet. Hands in sight! Name?"

Bilobi sighed. "Bilobi."

"You the one I want. They all tell me, 'Bilobi's good.' Say you're the best mechjack on the dump. Don't know why you're here, could work Outside, they say." The ganger shrugged. "Don't care, me. My name's Spill. Just talk, all I want now. You know what's this?" Spill fished a chip safe from his pink leather jacket. Through the thick plastic, Bilobi saw a ruby gleam. "Volition chip. Key chip. Eh? You begin to know now?" Spill tucked it away, darted a look to each side. "Whole dump full of dead iron, breakerboy, good for *nothing,* not a single keychip anywhere. But I got one, right here. Raise the dead, breakerboy, you and me!"

They don't learn, Bilobi thought. "Can't do it," Bilobi said, shaking his head. "Too risky. You're not the first to ask. You're not the first to try." He pointed to the wall, where iron cages hung. Desiccated corpses struck painful poses within the black bars.

Spill stepped closer. The slitter warbled. "Won't catch me. Us. You get hulks, piece together fine iron; then comes Spill, his chips. Pop 'em in, Bilobi, then we got Product." Spill offered a wide smile, exposing rhinestone-studded teeth. "Product! Market's wide open for mean mechs. Sell 'em to big flashmen; they need lots, and I know who to ask. Pigeon gutters, throwaway snuffers, viber vixens, leg breakers. Big demand, breakerboy."

Bilobi shook his head again. "Can't be done. I do O.K., scavenging legal. I get by. I stay alive. I'll never end up rotting on the wall, if I stay clean." A memory washed up behind his eyes: a ragged, snarling man, running

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from the company mechs, back and forth across the dump, wall to wall, until they caught him. When they welded him into the cage, when the iron glowed red, Grego had been too tired to scream. That had come later, a sound impossible to forget.

Spill's smile swam on his mouth, sagged into a snarl. The slitter whipped back and forth under Bilobi's nose, singing. "You rot right here, maybe. Ahh! What you make, scrounging old servomotors, good week? Four hundred, five maybe? Chump change, breakerboy Bilobi. Chump change! You live in a stinkhole, eat dirt food, got *nothing!* Give Spill one good hulk, all shiny, all smooth, and I give you fifty times more. Easy cash, clean work." Spill's white eyes glittered. "Don't be a chump, breakerboy." Imminent violence clotted in Spill's narrow face.

Bilobi spoke quickly, trying to ease him. "Look, you're right, Spill, I got nothing. Sure, I live like a dog; don't you know it's not what I'd do if I could do different. Don't you think I'd build iron if I thought I could get away with it? Listen, I've been here a long time; I know how it works. After the ingress crew pull out the volition chips, the hulks come over the wall on skyhook conveyors. Most times the fall smashes them so bad there's nothing left worth picking off. Just the little stuff: servos, wire harness, some sensors. But even when there is. . . ."

Spill kicked him with a steel-toed boot, and he felt a rib crack. After the pain eased, he uncurled a little. The ex-ganger looked down at him, spoke in a calmer voice. "Don't make me be hard, breakerboy. You could chop a thousand, build a hundred sweet ones. And I can get all the key-chips we need, once we get first hulk out. Monumental money here, Bilobi; don't shit me. We be asshole buddies now."

Bilobi got enough breath to speak. "How do you plan to get your hulk past the egress checkpoints?"

"Easy stuff. You build. After I see it walk and talk, you break down again, mix comps in with regular shipment. No problem, so?"

Bilobi summoned a regretful smile. "You don't know about the syntha-comps. They scan every outgoing shipment, jigsaw the components a million different ways, until they're sure nothing's going to click together and walk away." He pointed to the wall. "See Grego? The one on the right — with the skull peeking through his hair? He tried it that way."

Spill looked uncertain, but only for a moment. "We spread bits out over several shipments, then."

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"They keep files for years; that's why it takes so long to clear a shipment out. Why do you think there's such a monster market for unregistered iron? Because it's so hard to get. Hell, if I could get one out of the dump, I'd be a fool to sell it. Think what you could do with your own iron. Sit there fat and free under the police cams while your iron was out making money for you, and no way to pin it to you. No wonder the big flashmen will pay almost anything. But getting it out.... I just don't know how!"

Spill whipped the slitter back and forth, eyes narrow. "Don't jerk me, breakerboy. Got to be some way. Wait, maybe we send 'em over wall on internal power. Build 'em with scaling hooks — that be scary enough for the hardest flashman!"

"I'm not jerking you! That won't work, either. They got snapfields at the top of the walls, cut your hulk in half. Then they make a DNA indent on the pieces — I got to touch them when I build them — and they come for us. That's how they caught Malone, the one just above Grego. He looks a little funny; they skinned him before they put him in the cage. Spill, they take this *seriously*."

Spill's eyes rolled. "No! No! Must be a way, 'cause there got to be a way," Spill said. "You understand, Bilobi, keychip fronted to me by hard man? I got to come up with hot hulk, or I be dead meat. He'll hurt me worse than company mechs. If you say no enough to make me believe, then I got to cut you into lots of pieces, before I pull this through my head." The ex-ganger slashed at the air, and the slitter screamed melodiously.

Bilobi felt a twinge of regret, then a warmer, more immediate emotion. "O.K., O.K. You've convinced me. Maybe I've got an idea. You got any cash?"

"Some."

"There're rumors. Maybe there's a guy on the egress crew can be bought, if you've got enough." He told this untruth with an air of weary capitulation. In actuality, all the inspection crews were wireslaves who had no interest in money, or anything else that did not pump the right signal into their wires.

Spill giggled. He had the look of a lost man who has just strayed back into familiar territory. "You see! Megacred for us, breakerboy!" He helped Bilobi to his feet, slapping the dust from Bilobi's jacket, though he held the slitter ready with his other hand. "Megacred, Bilobi. You be rich, buy

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good clothes, buy hot joyfolk, live in Enclaves, eat like megatoff. Eh? Sound good, breakerboy?"

"Sure." *Give it one last shot,* he thought, *then it's on his head.* "So, what's your plan now? You'll come back when I've got the first hulk running?"

Spill's white eyes narrowed. "Don't take me for fool, breakerboy; that puts me in cutting mood. I let you go now, how I know you doing right? No, I ride your back till job done. I'm company. Take me to your burrow, breakerboy, and no tricks." The slitter made a fluttery music.

"All right, all right." Bilobi picked up his tool rack and walked away. The warm emotion stretched his mouth into a gleeful rictus, hidden from the one who followed. *Whether the world sends you good or evil, make something useful of it;* that had been dead Grego's favorite saying, though in the end, Grego had been too stupid to see where that thought finally led.

They reached the entrance to Bilobi's burrow, a narrow crawl under a stack of corroding janitorial robots. Spill clicked off the slitter, tucked it away. Now he held a little splinter gun. "You go first, breakerboy. No mantrap fast enough to save you from this," he said, waving the gun.

Bilobi slid through the opening and down the smooth incline. Spill followed on his heels, bounced to his feet.

"Nice hole you got, so nice it's weird; I seen worse in the Enclaves," Spill said, turning slowly. "You way ahead of me, you open for business. No one say you live like this." The room had polished metal walls and deep carpet, comfortable furniture and soft light. In one corner a bot with six spidery tool arms hunched over a chessboard, immobile. Against the far wall stood a half-track bot with a laser torch mounted on its central manipulator. Beside it was a media-bot, all pickups and screens and direct-connect sensory patches. In the center of the room stood a self-contained med-unit. Through the archway a farmbot gleamed under pink wide-spectrum lights, motionless against racks of green hydroponic trays. "Tell me true, breakerboy. All they need is keychips?" Spill's sparkling smile was wide with innocent delight.

"No," Bilobi said. "I'm afraid not."

Spill caught a reflection of something in the darkness behind him, started to whirl.

Cindilou stepped out, a twinkling movement, inhumanly fast. She

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caught Spill by the throat, crushed his gun hand into red jelly. She lifted Spill high; he kicked, struggled to scream through the elegant steel hand that clamped his windpipe.

Bilobi stepped to her side, caressed her smooth white shoulder. Spill's eyes shrieked, but no sound came from his straining mouth. "Meet Cindilou," Bilobi said. "She's a joygirl, rebuilt on an assassin chassis, upholstered in tank-grown Youngloretta skin. Beautiful, isn't she?" Of all the hulks he had resurrected, Cindilou was Bilobi's favorite. It was a shame she could not come out into the dump with him. If she could, he would never be troubled by men like Spill. But the observers on the wall must never suspect her existence; besides, men like Spill brought him the volition chips he needed to make his life perfect.

She looked at Bilobi, amber eyes glowing, a small, eager smile on her pale lips.

He nodded. "Just don't make a mess, Cindilou." So she twisted Spill's neck enough to kill him, but not enough to rupture the arteries.

When the body stopped shuddering, Bilobi took possession of Spill's shiny new chip.

"Shall I put him through the compost shredder?" Cindilou asked. Her voice was sweet, a little breathless.

"Sure." He hefted the chip, cast a speculative glance around the burrow. "What'll we build with this one, Cindilou?" He gestured, and the media-bot began to play a sprightly triumphant music, the farmbot went back to tending its tomato vines, and the chess player pushed a pawn forward. "I know! You're a fine cook, it's true, and so is Harald, whenever we can get him away from his chessboard, but . . . what about a really good chef?"

He laughed. "Chump change . . . ," he said. And licked his lips.

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The artist of the future in Mr. Onopa's wild extrapolation lives in a kind of ultimate welfare state and works directly for a patron, which can lead to some strange situations. Bob Onopa, whose story "The Lights" appeared here in August 1985, teaches English at the University of Hawaii.

The Artist of the Future

By Robert Onopa

WE WERE A full twenty minutes into the procedure before I even caught a glimpse of the brain radiologist, Dr. Fong. He'd left all the initial routine tests to his assistants, and at the start of the main scan, he'd been hidden, crouched behind his instruments. When he bobbed up at the midway point, all I could see was that he was short and he had a cowlick.

It wasn't until I eased back into a chair in his cluttered office that I was able to fully appreciate the cherubic roundness of his small head, the smoothness of his skin. He was nibbling on his index finger — his fingernails were bitten to the quick. His neck was thin, and his lab coat looked too big. The frigid temperature of the room sliced through my hospital gown. What they said about him was true: Dr. Fong looked like he was twelve years old.

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On a low shelf there was a model of Lunar City — crudely done, in my opinion, gobs of glue showing at corners, joints not quite matched. That's where I wished I were at the moment, on the Moon, in the colony. I'd actually gotten some good work done there a few years back — a basalt arrangement titled *High Lapidary*. You may have heard of the piece. "So," I said. "My problem's not organic. It's not my brain."

"Wanna see the scans?" he smiled. "You was thinkin' about sex. You gotta slight depression."

The phrase "slight depression" seemed to me wildly inaccurate. Obviously, no holographic scan could register the sense of panic, the hopeless heart-sinking, the agony of an artist like myself who had been on the circuit for too long and had run out of ideas. "So, um, I can't be admitted to a hospital?"

"Notta chance." Fong glanced down at my chart. "Hey, you gotta new assignment, yeah? Maybe dats gonna pick you right up. What kinda art you do?"

"I'm a sculptor," I sighed.

"Thassa life, bein' creative." Dr. Fong giggled and offered me a stick of gum.

"Doctor," I asked, just trying to be mean, "how *old* are you?" I was angry he wasn't going to let me sit out the next round of working grants; all I wanted was a break, some sort of sabbatical, somewhere to hide for a while to recharge my batteries.

"Forty-five," he said, looking embarrassed, hiding the pink package, which I now realized was bubble gum.

Forty-five. He acted like a prepubescent twerp and chewed bubble gum. There went my hope that with greater age came greater wisdom; there went my strategy of just hanging on till I got older. Here came a burst of peevishness. "You ever do any scans of your own brain?"

"Who tol' you that?" he said quickly, his face flushed.

I hadn't quite expected shame; I'd hit some sort of nerve. "Just guessing," I murmured, watching him squirm in his chair, wondering how to press my advantage. But before I could figure out what was going on, he ducked behind his desk and disappeared, busying himself by rifling through a low drawer. When I tried to speak again, he ordered me out without showing his face.

* * *

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I rode a mag-lev train out to the northern suburbs and walked from the station, hefting my one bag of clothes and my heavy case of tools. My new booking was on Great Barrington Street: *great* is the right word for it, with its wide lawns, its huge old houses from the twentieth century, its tall ancient oaks. When I first started on the circuit fifteen years ago, I would have been thrilled with patrons who lived this well, but not anymore. Rich people usually expected too much.

As I shuffled along, I reflected on how we artists had gotten into this mess. The current system of patronage began during what the historian Ian Travis MacMillan has termed The Age of the Stars, that forty-year period in which each successive American president either was, or would become, a well-known movie actor. At the same time a whole class of fine artists — poets, painters, sculptors, and composers — was becoming a dying breed, supported almost exclusively by government grants. By the late 1990s the world of high culture had become a microcosm of a welfare state.

Then, late in the frenzy of deregulation, President Brooke Shields signed into law the booking system we live by today. The reasoning of Congress and the administration went this way: since a taxpayer was indirectly supporting the arts with a certain percentage of his or her taxes anyway, why not book an artist *directly into the taxpayer's home*, for a length of time in proportion to the tax paid? Such a system seemed more responsive to the market; it eliminated "wasteful government arts bureaucracies." Ideally, the artist booked into a taxpayer's home produced some personalized work of art that made taxpaying all the more meaningful.

The working class generally ignored the arrangement, though I once had an affair with a ballet dancer who had to perform behind the counter of a Ms. Soyburger restaurant for three minutes. Most artists are now booked into upper-income households for a month, sometimes longer. The food is usually excellent, but the expectations can make you feel faint.

The Reynolds house was in the middle of the block, three stories high, mostly glass. A pretentious crystal entrance portico. Down the driveway a garage for three mag-lev coupes, a huge backyard. I screwed up my courage and rang the bell. Dr. Justin Reynolds was an ophthalmologist, his wife a malpractice attorney, and they were very rich. I was booked for two months.

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The girl who answered the door was wearing red platform heels, mesh stockings, a synthetic tigerskin microskirt, and a tank top. Two huge gold earrings pulled down her lobes. I'd evidently intruded on one of the kinky afternoon sessions for which ophthalmologists had become famous.

The girl looked at me and grinned salaciously.

"I've come at a bad time," I said. "I'll just, uh, disappear down the street for a while."

"Oh wingy, you must be the artist. HEY DADDY, HE'S HERE," she shouted back into the bright cavern of the house. "Dads is in the kitchen meditating. I'm Dusty. I just happen to live here with these old people."

Such was my introduction to the Reynoldses' fourteen-year-old daughter.

Dr. Justin Reynolds swept into the entranceway wearing a white meditation robe. He kissed me. He was effusive in his praise for the artist, as he put it, whose work he admired every night he watched the Moon.

A few minutes later his wife, Andrea, came stomping into the living room muttering distractedly about missing lingerie. She was an attractive but aging brunette, wearing a severe black business suit. I don't think she realized I'd arrived, because she ignored me at first. When I was introduced, she babbled about changing into something more comfortable and dashed up the stairs. Five minutes later she strolled into the kitchen wearing a see-through blouse over subcutaneous prosthetic breasts — now it was her daughter's turn to look annoyed.

In the ensuing tour of the property — the site, after all, of the work I was about to produce — the Reynoldses showed me the architectural highlight of their house, their Typhoon Pia Room. A few years back, they'd hired a decorator to simulate the devastation of a hurricane, a fashionable look, but one not particularly conducive to my kind of sculpture.

Naturally, what really caught my attention was the substantial block of white marble in the backyard, a cube precisely one meter high, one meter wide. It was of a particularly spectacular variety, shipped in, I learned, from northern Italy at great expense.

"O.K.," I said. "I know just where to start."

* * *

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THAT EVENING the Reynoldses hosted a barbecue to show me off to some of their neighbors and friends. A famous poet booked into a home up the block was among the guests. Aside from a rusty Weber grill that Dr. Reynolds dragged out onto the deck to cook on, the affair seemed to me an ostentatious display of wealth — we were served martinis made with atomically pure vodka distilled in orbit, heart-of-palm salad, kangaroo steaks.

I drank too much. My chat with the poet, who was having trouble forming coherent sentences, did nothing to raise my spirits. What, I asked myself as I looked around a crowd sparkling with platinum jewelry and young with plastic surgery, could I possibly give these people that they didn't already have?

I made the mistake of asking that question to Dr. and Mrs. Reynolds while coffee (Kona) and dessert (Candied Orchids) were being served.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Dr. Reynolds said, smiling broadly, waving his pink hands. "Just the surprise of art, the . . . unexpected."

"We do have several years' taxes tied up in you," his wife said with a tight lawyer's grin, squeezing my knee. She rotated her eyes upward, to the night sky, as if suggesting the Moon.

". . . Just to have our lives changed, transformed," Dr. Reynolds went on. He was on a roll and had everybody's attention now. ". . . Just to see the world fresh and new."

I saw the poet secretly empty the pitcher of martinis into a water glass and drink it straight down. He got so sloshed he had to be carried home.

Later that night I had to bar my door against the Reynoldses daughter, who wanted to share some of her pornographic holotapes. She fell asleep on the rug outside. But then her mother came stumbling up the hall to knock on my door. Apparently, she tripped over Dusty. There were some wicked screams, shouts about missing lingerie, and , judging from the thumps and groans, a struggle between the two of them.

The next day I accepted the inevitable, hauled my tools down into the backyard before breakfast, and started in on the block of white marble.

In the small hours of the morning, I'd come up with an idea. It was a minimalist idea, true, the nightmare of a bankrupt imagination, but it had the advantage of being totally honest to the original material. I intended to cut up the large cube into a series of smaller blocks. Then I'd create an

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arrangement in the yard, maybe just off the deck. I'd have to be cagey about the project to pull it off, but at least I'd produce something.

The women sauntered out onto the lawn after breakfast, drawn by the sound of my hammer and chisel.

"Oh wingy," the Reynoldses daughter said, licking croissant flakes off her fingers. "Dads is gonna be happy."

"Why don't you use the laser saw?" Mrs. Reynolds asked. "That's what Justin would do."

I gave them my best Giaconda smile, and tapped on.

"Maybe he's, like, warming up, Moms." Dusty raised her arms, leaned from side to side.

"Mmmm," Mrs. Reynolds tentatively concurred, starting some twists. "Warming up. That's kind of attractive."

Dusty got down on the lawn and countered with leg-opening exercises. Before too long, they both were dancing in the backyard.

Still, I told myself as the first day passed into the second, and I recovered from a fit of midnight weeping, at least I had an idea, reductivist though it might be. What these people needed was less — that would be my surprise. By the third day I was rather pleased with myself. The incoherent poet came by, and I passed up another drinking binge. I asked for, and received, Friday off. Among other things, I thought the Reynoldses might do with less of me.

I hadn't forgotten about Dr. Fong. On my day off, I went over to his institute. Some instinct told me not to go right in. I circled the building, slid among some hedges that I calculated were growing just outside his lab, and discovered, peeking through the leaves, that I could spy through his window.

What I saw didn't surprise me as much as how long it went on. Dr. Fong was sitting under one of his brain-scanning machines as if it were one of those antique hair dryers that women used to use. He was reading a comic book, and, as far as I could tell from the reedy noise escaping from an exhaust vent, he was humming the theme song from "Top Neuron," a Saturday-morning kids' program. He hummed the same tune, over and over, for the two solid hours he spent under the hood of the machine.

That afternoon I did a little research in the institute library. I tracked down the work Fong had done early in his career, read through the monographs and studies he'd published in *Cerebellum Clinics* and *Left*

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Brain Journal. Apparently, he was a member of the bioelectronic school, an obscure group of theoretical scientists who speculated that it was the brain that controlled the aging of the body's cells through bioelectronic impulses rather than the other way around. He'd developed his diagnostic scanning device — a kind of radar, as far as I could make out, which sent impulses into the cortex and read a reflected signal — while working on subcortical trauma about ten years ago.

He'd abruptly stopped publishing about the same time.

The Reynoldses went trekking in Nepal for two weeks, which made it possible for me to finish my work on the marble ahead of schedule. I used the nights to labor through texts on the brain to make more sense out of what Fong was up to — but mainly I was up to my ankles in marble chips, working in a pleasant frenzy of artistic consummation. On the Saturday afternoon the Reynoldses returned, I was able to present the series of miniature blocks. Each had precisely the same proportions as the original piece of marble. Its brick-sized offspring were now set in an aesthetically meaningful arrangement — stacked four high and set in four short, straight rows — across the middle of the backyard.

Dr. Reynolds took one look and kissed me.

His wife shook my hand and slapped my behind.

Dusty grinned and licked her lips.

No pompous explanation, no abstruse aesthetic justification, apparently, was necessary. I felt terrific. I ambled up Great Barrington Street to take the poet up on that drink he'd long ago promised me in the sign language to which he'd been reduced. But nobody was home at the house he'd been booked into. I did see something odd in the front yard, though: a low pile of overturned soft earth that looked for all the world like a fresh grave. The sight was oddly chilling, but it only dented my mood.

I walked back to the Reynoldses' house and received the shock of my life.

Dr. Reynolds and his wife were *moving* the small marble blocks of my piece, piling them into a sort of armchair shape near the deck. Cutting the stones had been relatively easy, but setting them out on the yard — that's what had taken what genius I could muster, and half the time I'd spent working on the piece. I was stupefied that almost every element of the sculpture had been moved.

I was about to condemn the Reynoldses as philistines and threaten a

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lawsuit, when Dusty, wearing a very sexy peasant outfit from Nepal, emerged from the house carrying a new titanium grill rack. Before I could open my mouth, she set it into place over the arms of the "chair."

My waving hands, all calluses and still imbedded with marble dust, dropped to my sides. It was obvious what they were doing: building a new barbecue. It shortly became clear that that was what the marble had been there for all along.

"Can't tell you how much we appreciate your pitching in," Mrs. Reynolds said. "Especially with your own work to do."

"Hand-cut bricks," Dr. Reynolds said. "Impressive."

Dusty winked. "It makes you like a member of the family, yeah? Are we getting kinky or what?"

I broke out into a cold sweat. I wanted to run somewhere for a drink, and I thought for a second time of the poet a block away. Then I remembered that odd sight on the front lawn. I asked if maybe one of the Lhasa apsos had died up there.

Dr. Reynolds smiled appreciatively. "Now there's a sense of humor."

"I guess you haven't heard," his wife said with a wicked grin. "The poet finished early."

Dusty nodded. "What an idea, yeah? He left a note. The hanging . . . I mean, the way he committed suicide . . . was like his poem, see?"

"It *was* his poem," Mrs. Reynolds corrected, hefting another brick for the barbecue. "He recorded his final grunt. It really was terrific."

"The guy had some imagination, after all," Dr. Reynolds said, dusting off his hands. "I was actually moved."

Dr. Fong didn't want to see me, but by making some insinuations over the intercom based on my present connection with a malpractice attorney, I got him to grudge me ten minutes of his time.

He was slouched behind his desk, trying to hide behind an oversized surgical mask. I didn't mind; I knew I'd have his full attention soon enough. I laid out my initial suspicions about the way he tried to stay out of the public eye (confirmed now, I said, by his mask, which he promptly removed). I described my research at the institute library, my understanding of his early work on the bioelectric impulses of the brain and their relationship to each cell's instruction set for aging.

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"Sure," I said, "maybe you were working on subcortical imaging when you put together your first diagnostic scanner. But you eventually discovered an interesting side effect of sitting under the hood. As the years went by . . . Look, Fong, I know how you spend your mornings. I know what you do to yourself."

Fong, who'd been on the verge of ordering me out, turned petulant with denial. "You got a wrong guy," he sputtered. His hands obsessively reached for the surgical mask, pulled it toward his face . . . shoved it away. "Maybe you got some kinda problem inna brain youself," he said, his cheeks flushing.

Over the previous week, I'd been back to spy in the bushes several more times. I'd brought along the sophisticated camera I used like a notebook to collect ideas for my work. Across his desk, I laid the photographs I had taken, humming the theme from "Top Neuron" as I did so. Each was time-and-date-stamped by GEOS satellite feed, and the pictures made a series. Their net effect was to drain the blood from Fong's face and to replace the beady intensity in his dark eyes with an uncontrolled twitch.

"For starters," I suggested, "the American Board of Radiology might be interested in these photographs, don't you think?"

Fong blanched even whiter.

"How much is board certification worth to a brain radiologist?" I wondered out loud. "A guy with his own institute, substantial capital investment . . . and maybe a certain privacy to protect?"

He took it like a kid, weeping and banging EEG probes onto his desk. But after a few noisy minutes, the tantrum passed like a squall. The next thing I knew, Dr. Fong rubbed his pink cheeks and smiled. "Sooo. What you price? I think maybe you lika lose a couple years. I get it."

"No," I said, "you don't get it: My life's long enough. I don't want to be turned into a kid. I just have this problem with my work." At this point I faltered; I really didn't have a clear idea of what Fong could do for me, of what my price was. But I did have a notion: artists, I suggested, were able to produce only when they had a favorable bioelectrical organization of the brain; bioelectronics was the real machinery behind such metaphors as talent and imagination.

"Yeah," he said, scratching the peach fuzz on his chin. "*Maybe* you right. Den again. . . ." Fong got up and shuffled over to his workstation,

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mumbled fragments of sentences citing research.

My spirits lifted. I think what I wanted was something like a neurological hot line, a direct link to the Muse; I hoped there was something he could do to me with his scanner.

My hopes turned out to be desperately naive. "Nah," Fong said. "No way." He rattled off an explanation out of information theory, the gist of which was that art violated ordinary stochastic processes so often it couldn't be properly modeled, even with chaos theory and fractals.

"What am I going to do?"

"Maybe you come up wit' idea fo you work. You gotta be patient." Fong giggled.

"What's so funny?"

"I say, you be patient. If I'm a doctor, you patient anyway. Pretty good joke, yeah? How about you gimme pictures? I can do noting fo you — maybe you like try couple minutes inna machine anyway?"

I did try a few minutes under the scanning imager for the hell of it, on Fong's speculation that I just needed "little charge, maybe." I felt some tingling in my head, a warm, pleasant sensation like the flood of endorphins, during the session. Either my anxieties about being turned into a fetus, or the procedure itself, kicked up a vivid childhood memory. The slight pressure I felt on my forehead became the brim of a blue Chicago Cubs cap.

But when my ten minutes under the hood were over and I pushed myself out of the chair, I felt the familiar twinges in my forearms, my knees, my back — shaping and moving stone wears you down over the years — and I felt the by-now-familiar gnawing ache of an empty imagination. In short, I felt like my old self again.

"Don't count on having seen the last of me," I told Fong, packing in the photographs. "We haven't settled this thing between us yet."

I MARKED TIME up on Great Barrington Street by first constructing, then deconstructing, a sizable crate in the Reynoldses' driveway, describing it with such theoretical mystifications as "the invisible sculpture of the inner eye," and "the space of space," temporarily, at least, throwing up a smoke screen. In the evenings I locked myself in the garage, exercising furiously at the rusting home health spa the ophthalmologist had at one time built into a corner. I didn't have any real ideas for

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the sculpture I was supposed to produce — and now I didn't even have any material to shape it from, either — but in part of my gut, I did begin to feel that strange confidence, which I associate with any eventually successful artistic endeavor, that everything was going to work out. Another part of my gut warned that the sensation might only be a temporary euphoric effect of Dr. Fong's treatment.

Socially, I lived peaks and valleys. I spent two pleasant Sunday dinners with the Reynoldses and their neighbors, showing them my slides of the Moon. They were such a receptive audience that I tried to legitimize the now-dismantled crate by describing it as a transparent echo of my Moon rocks, and so now "the space *of* space of *space* in space," but I had to draw back when I heard someone start giggling. For a week, Dr. Reynolds wore his wife's breast prosthesis, which the American Ophthalmology Association was recommending for meditating on feminine vision. Then he took up target shooting. His wife and Dusty continued to fight about lingerie. At a postinaugural barbecue — the pristine marble by now covered with soot — Andrea Reynolds smeared kangaroo drippings on Dusty's tigerskin microskirt, and the bad blood between them simmered for days. My mornings at least had become very pleasant. I'd taken to walking up the block to visit the poet's grave, and playing with the Lhasa apsos, who were using the turned earth to bury their bones.

I got so involved, in fact, in the day-to-day of living on Great Barrington Street that I almost forgot my mission, and came to think that maybe I'd done my job with the empty crate and the hot air about space in space, that I could satisfy the Reynoldses with The Emperor's New Statue, you might say, and just walk away from it after all.

Mrs. Reynolds brought me up short three days before the conclusion of my grant when she called me down to her home office at nine in the evening. She was sitting at her steel rolltop desk, a triptych of computer screens flickering with figures that I gradually recognized as previous years' tax forms. She was wearing a copy of Dusty's microskirt, mesh stockings, and red platform shoes. Her legs were crossed, and her calf was swinging urgently. "Just counting up our investment," she said with a smile. "Just wondering when you're going to deliver."

I put together a smile, looking down with false modesty, seeing on my shirtfront a three-inch-long stain of bearnaise sauce. "I'd be giving you less than it's worth, don't you think, Andrea, if I didn't keep the

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surprise till the right moment?"

"*Justin* talked about surprise. All along, I've been talking about fulfillment." The lines around her hard eyes showed her age and the years she'd spent in court. I saw in them, too, a real hunger, echoed in her desperate outfit, in the urgent way she swung her leg. From the basement I could hear the pings of Dr. Reynolds's laser pistol.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, that's when my idea crystallized.

On the morning of the final day of my grant, I went to see Fong. He was furious at my proposal. I guaranteed that if he cooperated just this once, he could have the photographs and the negatives, and he'd have seen the last of me. He reluctantly agreed.

When I got back to Great Barrington Street, I had my hands full aborting an official unveiling barbecue that Justin Reynolds had, without telling me, planned for that night. He was persuaded to cancel the affair only when I insisted that the work was "intimately personal," and that the presence of others at the unveiling would dilute its worth. Andrea Reynolds — I could almost see the tax figures flashing behind her eyes —concurred.

At 7:00 P.M. I blindfolded the three members of the Reynolds family. Then I drove them down to Fong's institute in their mag-lev station wagon.

Fong put them under the three scanning machines. He was sweating, anxious, pissed. He had important clients, it turned out, for the equipment that I was taking up overnight. Dr. and Mrs. Reynolds and their daughter were calm, chatting among themselves. Andrea murmured about an increase in net worth; the doctor kept saying "Om," or "home" — I couldn't quite tell. As she went under the steel apparatus, Dusty speculated about how maybe her hair was finally going to turn out the right color.

It happened that just before we switched the power on, I decided to change something in the piece; this last-minute adjustment, the final stroke at the deadline, convinced me that my personal genius had returned. With Fong sputtering, I upped the amperage to Dr. Reynolds's hood and lowered the current to his wife's. Then I reversed Dusty's leads. Fong gasped.

As the switch contacts were closing, Dr. Reynolds asked what was going on.

"Think sleep," I told him. "We're talking dreamlife here. We're talking possibility."

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We shut the machines down at seven in the morning. I instructed the Reynoldses to take off their blindfolds, and as they did so, I made a traditional unveiling speech, thanking my generous patrons.

"I'm proud to present to you," I concluded, "my most recent work of art — yourselves."

Dusty noticed the changes first. She was struck by the size of her bosom, the width of her hips. "Hey Dads," she said, then faltered, surprised with the husky depth of her voice.

"Happy birthday," I told her. "You're twenty-two years old."

"*Wingy*," she blinked, adjusting her skirt. She glanced at her parents, blinked at the sight of her father, swallowed hard. Then she looked at me with a big smile. "Just, um . . . you mind if I, like, leave right away? I'm, like, only interested in mature individuals now?" She took the keys to the station wagon with her.

The acrid smell of burnt insulation and overheated electronics filled the air.

Dr. Reynolds had slipped out of his chair and wandered off to Dr. Fong's workstation. The dirty blond cowlick of the ophthalmologist precisely mirrored the tuft of black hair protruding from the back of the brain radiologist's head. Reynolds called up some research; Fong pointed to a row of figures . . . and they turned away to poke at a crude model spaceship. Reynolds looked happy as a clam. I heard the phrase "group practice."

Andrea Reynolds was doing stretching exercises while inspecting her reflection in the floor-to-ceiling window.

The lines near her eyes were gone. Gravity had disinherited her shape — she really was a knockout. Her figure brought to mind my dancer girlfriend from the past.

"Bravo," Andrea Reynolds said. "This is certainly a work of art. And . . . unexpected, all right." She studied her image. "Almost criminal. How old am I, really? I mean, I look potentially illegal for what I feel like. . . ."

I consulted the chart Dr. Fong and I had made up during the night. "You now have the body," I told her, "of a twenty-*one*-year-old woman. Which makes you — metabolically speaking, I guess — a year younger than your daughter at the moment. If you're keeping score."

She preened herself. "Who's competing?" she asked with a wet smile. Then she kissed me, and I came to understand how I might spend the

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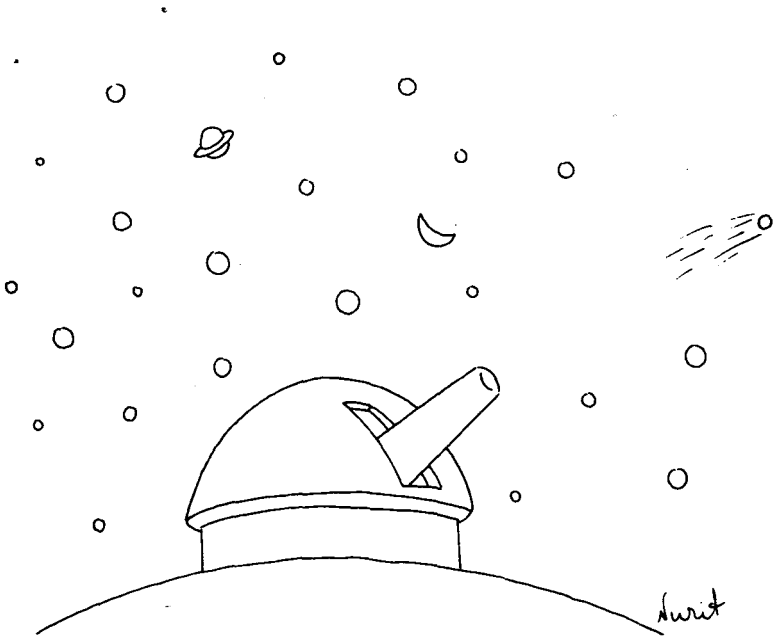
medical leave I figured I could now twist out of Justin Reynolds by way, let's say, of a gratuity.

I was thinking in terms of a sanatorium in Tahiti, on one of the outer islands. My latest work had taken so much out of me — and now I had to compose a title — that, well, I felt I'd be needing a rest, a break, some way to recharge my batteries.



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OK, sports fans, here's the Sf story you've been waiting for, about nothing less than the greatest basketball game of all time: the Twentieth Century NBA All-Stars against the Cyborg Superstars of 2055.

Lost in Cleveland

By Vance Aandahl

1.

SOMEONE WHO'S LOST in a city of the future is dreaming.

Someone is dreaming he's Wilt Chamberlain back when Wilt was a boy. Someone is dreaming it's his seventh birthday. August 21, 1943. Someone is dreaming he's sneaked away from his own party to be by himself awhile in the backyard.

He lies stretched out on the ground underneath a lilac bush, concealed by its dense green foliage. The soil underneath his stomach feels cool. He holds a yellow yo-yo, one of his gifts, clenched tightly in his right hand. It feels warm and round, like a sun. He looks out from the deep shade of the lilac bush at the grass glittering in the brilliant Philadelphia sunshine. He can see every blade distinctly blazing. From the house he hears the sounds of his party going on without him. Musical chairs. Pin the tail on the

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donkey. And from a second-story window, very faintly, someone who's dreaming he's Wilt Chamberlain can hear a radio newscaster talking about the war.

The fact that his absence hasn't dampened his guests' spirits does not disturb him. He's smarter than they are, quicker, and taller, too. He stretches his long arms and legs over the moist, fermenting earth. He loves the darkness of deep shade at noon in the middle of summer. He loves the perfect aloneness of his hideout under the drooping lilac boughs. He will stay here awhile longer and rejoin the party only when he feels like it. He ignores their distant voices, their merry laughter. He looks out at the sunlight shining off the lawn with such radiance it seems every blade of grass is a polished emerald mirror. The bright yellow yo-yo in his hand sends pulses of heat up his arm. Someone who's dreaming he's Wilt Chamberlain feels like a lonely giant holding a ball enclosed entirely within his fist, or a lonely god holding a sun.

2.

SOMEONE in the display arena projection booth at Holomeat Productions is dreaming. Someone named Herbie.

In Herbie's dream, Herbie is Herbie, and he's lying naked flat on his back on a colossal slab of lime Jell-O, getting gang-banged by the Bangles. The short Bangle kneels next to his head and holds a handgun to his temple while the tall Bangles take turns on him.

Herbie is Herbie. He lifts his head and smiles at the short Bangle. She scowls and adjusts her grip on the gun. He looks down his body. The tall Bangles are crouched around his crotch. He can see what they're doing to him and hear what they say, but he can't feel a damn thing.

That's the trouble with Herbie's dreams: he always sees and hears and smells and tastes everything in minute, perfect detail — but he never *feels* anything.

The tall Bangles get to their feet, undulating the shiny green surface of the Jell-O like a water bed. Herbie observes his rapidly deflating penis. Logic tells him he's just had an orgasm, but if so, he missed it.

Keeping her gun trained on his head, the short Bangle gets up, too. The four of them stand side by side sneering down at him. They're wearing their "Walk like an Egyptian" costumes.

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"You bastard," says the short Bangle. Herbie can tell she's the boss. "All your life, one way or another, you've been abusing women." She spits thickly on his chest. "That's why we raped you. Now you know what it feels like."

But Herbie doesn't know what it feels like. Herbie hasn't felt a thing.

3.

AMAZING," SAID the customer. "It all looks so goddamn *real*."

"Yes, yes indeed." Squintwell flicked a switch, and the Jell-O slab vanished. The display arena was empty again. "That was a free dream, of course. The dreamer's in that projection booth over there. He's our number one dreamer. Number one, that is, in terms of image clarity and detail. Unfortunately, many of this fellow's free dreams are rather offensive, and we have no way of censoring them on the spot during a demo." Squintwell blushed furiously, remembering the orgy on the Jell-O slab. Nervously, he patted himself: underneath the iridescent bumblebee stripes of his sales suit, his February-March disease shield crinkled reassuringly. "When we use him for a production number, a power pack of implant studs controls his brain. The studs select only those memories we need, and suppress everything else, but I can assure you the projection is every bit as realistic."

"Tell me more about this dreamer," said the customer. "What's his name?"

"Herbert Zimmerman. He's a retired lawn-mower repairman, ninety-eight years old."

"That's how old *I* am." The customer cackled down at Squintwell. "Where'd you find the old fart?"

Squintwell winced at that horrible word, then forced himself to answer. "In a nursing hive in New Chicago. At first he appeared ordinary enough, but we soon discovered that the man's visual memory when dreaming is truly phenomenal. He's one in 10 billion."

Squintwell led the customer away from the display arena's observation deck. The old man moved at a slow pace, supporting himself with an antiquated hand-held walker.

"Those broads he was with looked kinda familiar. Anybody I should know?"

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Squintwell winced again, then nodded. "Our computers have identified them as the members of a singing group that was popular during the 1980s."

It was hard for Squintwell to keep his sales chatter going. He didn't like would-be centenarians, especially vulgar ones who towered over him. Besides, the old man's attire was even shabbier than his speech; it seemed *highly* unlikely that he had enough credit to pay for the production number he wanted. Still, the boss had given Squintwell an exceptionally urgent nod when the old man hobbled into the office half an hour ago.

Squintwell heaved a sigh. "I believe they called themselves the Bangles."

"That's right!" The customer nodded his bald, liver-spotted head like a congenial turkey and chuckled. "The Bangles. Imagine that. They haven't crossed my mind once in seventy years, but now I remember who they were. I think I do. I might be getting 'em mixed up with the Beach Boys."

"After seventy years, that's *quite* understandable." Squintwell had to keep reminding himself to walk slowly enough for the customer to keep up. Why the old man didn't wear robopants was beyond him. "But in the dream projection we just watched, Herbert Zimmerman remembered them perfectly. In his dreams, he remembers *everything* perfectly, even persons and things he saw only once. He's our very best dreamer."

"Which brings us to what I want, right? *My* dream, you might say. Was this guy a basketball fan when he was young? Did he follow the NBA back in the twentieth century?"

"Avidly. As a matter of fact, watching sports on TV was his chief passion in life."

At last they reached the front office. Squintwell glanced around and wiped his forehead with a hygiene hankie. The customer abandoned his walker and sank down into a pulsing green-and-orange biochair. Rubbing the cramps out of his arthritic, vein-bulging hands, the old man looked intently up at Squintwell.

"Then it can be done? It's really possible?"

"Oh yes. All things are possible here at Holomeat Productions. But to do what you want . . ." Squintwell paused judiciously, eyeing the old man's threadbare green T-shirt, wrinkled jeans, and dilapidated gym shoes. ". . . will be rather expensive."

"Screw the expense!" The old man raised his walker and shook it. "I've

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got more credit than I know what to do with. I'm one of the richest men in the world."

"Really?" Squintwell struggled desperately to keep the skepticism out of his voice. "I didn't know that, sir."

"Yeah." The customer gave Squintwell a hard look. "When I retired from the NBA, I invested everything I had in New Zealand wines. The rest is history."

"I *see!*" Squintwell's heart raced with excitement. He took one step back, bowed, and clasped his hands in a gesture of respect. "We'll begin immediately, Mr. Bird."

4.

OLD MAN Bird was rich, all right. He rented the world's largest indoor sports arena, the Cleveland Bonedome, and furnished it with a teak-and-mahogany parquet floor. He gave the extravaganza he intended to produce a grandiose name — the Match of the Millennia — and he advertised it on the global sublims for weeks in advance. He promised the public nothing less than the greatest basketball game of all time. Half a million fans planned to see it in person in the Bonedome, and billions more would watch the action on their vidwalls at home.

"This is the big one," Bird liked to say when interviewed. "The stars of yesteryear will finally get a chance to prove they're better ballplayers than these goddamn cyborgs."

"That seems difficult to believe," the interviewer would invariably reply. "When you compare statistics—"

"Stats are for losers. Back in the old days, we played with feeling. When a player got hot, he felt it. These cyborgs may have great stats, but they play like machines. All of 'em. They just don't have a feel for the game. You wait and see — my Twentieth-Century All-Stars will find a way to stay close, and then, in the fourth quarter, one of 'em will get hot and win the goddamn game."

Bird's eyes showed a fierce pride.

It was hard to take the old man seriously. After all, the Cyborg Superstars of 2055 averaged seven foot two, ran like police pursuit hounds, and hit 67 percent of their shots from the field. Sportscasters everywhere

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ridiculed the Match of the Millennia, predicting that after the game was over, the event would be renamed the Clobbering in Cleveland. Bird was dismissed as a senile eccentric, and the early Shanghai betting line established the Borgs as thirty-four point favorites.

The Borgs' center, DeWayne Jones 4999ZJ, summed up the general sentiment. "We're gonna slag 'em," he said in a level, metallic, unfeeling tone of voice. "No contest."

5.

SOMEONE IS dreaming. Someone named Herbie.

Herbie is Herbie; and this time, Herbie's tied to the stake — except, the stake isn't a stake. It's an enormous Butterfinger candy bar. Purple mist swirls around Herbie, then parts to reveal a diaphanous apparition — the ghost of a grizzly bear floating in front of him. The ghost bear stands upright and dances, shuffling its feet and clapping its forepaws.

Out of the purple mist comes Dick Clark. He walks up to Herbie and holds a Bic lighter under his nose.

"You're the one who murdered Gentle Ben." Clark gestures toward the dancing bear. "Now you're going to pay for it." He bends over.

Herbie looks down. Piled up around the base of the Butterfinger is a large quantity of Easter-basket grass. Clark flicks his Bic, and the filmy green plastic explodes into flames.

His sports coat flapping like a vestigal wing, Clark leaps adroitly back. "Burn, you lousy bear killer! Burn!"

Herbie hears the fire crackling at his feet. He smells a rich aroma of chocolate as the Butterfinger begins to melt. Looking down, he sees his skin blistering red and charring black as the flames lick up his legs. The stench of igniting hair leaves an acrid taste in the back of his throat.

"Feel the pain!" shrieks Clark.

But Herbie doesn't feel the pain. He can hear and smell and see and taste everything perfectly, but he doesn't *feel* a goddamn thing.

* * *

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6.

TWELVE. TWELVE players from the entire twentieth century. Each selected from the season when he was at his best. Old Man Bird chose carefully.

Starting center: Amarante Gomez, 1999 Montreal Snow Leopards.

Starting forwards: Del Banks, 1998 New Jersey Nets; Larry Bird, 1984 Boston Celtics.

Starting guards: Earvin Johnson, 1980 Los Angeles Lakers; Lafayette Smith, 1997 New York Knicks.

Second string: Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Julius Erving, Alonzo Mourning, Michael Jordan, Oscar Robertson.

Bench warmer: Detroit Godfelter, Wilt Chamberlain.

7.

WILT AWOKE in a brilliantly illuminated room. He'd been dreaming, but now he was awake. The lights dazzled his eyes. He was standing. In the dry air he could smell something that reminded him of a baby's saliva.

Wilt's eyes adjusted to the light. He realized he was standing with a bunch of ballplayers. One of them was actually taller than he was, two others nearly as tall. Amazing. But were any of them as quick? He doubted it.

He looked down at himself and saw he was wearing a brown-and-yellow uniform. So were the others. We must all belong to the same team, he thought. No one spoke, but they all were looking at each other with expressions of bewilderment or despair on their faces. Heady pollens swirled through his mind.

A door opened, and a harsh-looking young woman walked into the room. She was wearing a black jumpsuit made from a type of cloth Wilt had never seen before. Parts of her face were flesh, but other parts were metal. Something about the way she looked made Wilt think of an arsenic lobster.

"You're the Twentieth-Century All-Stars," she said. "I'm your trainer, Miss Percuoco. Welcome to 2055, and please don't be alarmed. You're not

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real persons, just holomeat dream repros, so there's nothing to be frightened of. Now, does anybody want a rubdown?"

Wilt's whole frame shook with a violent blue shudder.

"What's she talkin' 'bout?" asked one of his teammates.

"Yeah," said another. "I don't like this. What's goin' on here, man?"

"You boys don't have to worry about that." Miss Percuoco cut them with her eyes. "You don't have to worry about a goddamn thing. You're just here to play ball. Is that clear?"

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and strode out of the room. Wilt sagged in on himself. By now he'd noticed they were in some sort of locker room, but the lockers looked like giant zucchini embedded in the walls, and the benches appeared to have grown out of the floor. It was all too weird to take.

An old man hobbled into the room, shakily supporting himself with a walker. Liver spots covered the top of his head, and his skin looked like parchment. But Wilt could tell from the sparkle in his eyes that the old man hadn't lost his balls.

"My name's Larry Bird," he croaked. "You're my team, and I'm your coach."

"Baloney," said one of the players. "How could *you* be Larry Bird? *I'm* Larry Bird."

Seventy years separated the two, but there was no mistaking their underlying identicality. Ugliest face I ever saw, thought Wilt. And they both have it.

"You're me, son, and I'm you." The old man hobbled over and gave his younger self a poke in the ribs. "Except that I'm the *real* me, and you're just a holomeat dream repro. But so what? It doesn't matter. What *does* matter is that you're starting, son, and you better damn well play the way you're capable of playing."

The old man stepped back and scanned the whole team, looking each of them fiercely in the eye, one by one. Wilt felt something burning in his stomach like powdered glass.

"You're my team, and my money says you've got a better feel for the game than the cyborgs you're up against. I want you to go out there and play like this is the last time you'll *ever* play."

"Why?" asked Wilt.

"Because it is."

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8.

BORGS BE BAD proclaimed a host of sea-green ycrilon flick-shirts. The crowd knew which team they wanted to win. They flexed vibers and cranked jackhorns, and the Bonedome exploded in a riot of noise.

The Borgs *were* bad. They ranged in height from six foot seven to seven foot nine, and ran the court like cheetahs on amphetamines. None of the twelve had a vertical leap under thirty-five inches. And yes, they all had what you might call a keen eye for the basket.

Yes, my man, the Borgs were bad, and they came to play, all gliding slidiness and sudden pops and wham-bam-all-over-you-Sam defense: talk about quickness; talk about slice and dice.

Old Man Bird had told the interviewers he thought the Borgs played like machines. They played like machines, all right — machines of sweet, loving grace. And they baptized the Twentieth-Century All-Stars in a very cold tank of water. Did they ever.

Halftime: Borgs 59, All-Stars 37.

"What the hell's the matter?" screamed Coach Bird. Blue veins stood out on his forehead, struggling like worms. "You guys look like walked-on dog shit!"

"I don't know, Coach," said their starting center, a broad-shouldered Mexican guy who was (amazingly enough) two or three inches taller than Wilt. "I feel kinda flat."

"Me, too," said the backup center, a bald guy with a weak chin and an African name but a New York style. He was nearly as tall as Wilt, not quite. "I feel kinda flat, too."

Coach Bird swung his head around and glared at his younger self. "What about *you*?" he snarled. "Where's that goddamn jumper now that I really need it?"

"Well, shit, I don't know," said his younger self. "It's like these other guys been saying. I feel kinda flat or somethin'."

"Hey, coach," said Wilt. "Why not put *me* in? Last week I scored a hundred points in a single game, and I think I might just be quick enough to use a few of my moves on these guys, or whatever they are we're playing."

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Coach Bird looked long and hard at Wilt. "You're hot tonight?" he asked. "You can *feel* it?"

"I don't know exactly what you mean by that. I mean, I *feel* things all the time, not just when I play, but—"

"Forget it, kid." The old man wrinkled his nose and shook his head vehemently back and forth. "You're too skinny. I never should've picked you for the team. I should've stuck with guys from the eighties and the nineties."

He doesn't know how fast I can run, thought Wilt. He doesn't know how quick and intelligent I am. He doesn't understand. I could win this game for him if only. . . .

To hell with it. All my life, people have treated me like a freak. They boo me because they can't stand the thought of someone as tall as I am also being such a good player. They boo me because I'm *too* good. And now this guy doesn't think I'm good *enough*. Too skinny? To hell with it!

He got up off the end of the bench and walked out.

9.

WILT STOOD still in the unbelievable alligator quiet of the Cleveland night.

So still. He stretched. He blinked his eyes. The parking lot was filled with winged vehicles unlike anything he'd ever seen. He walked slowly out through them until he came to a street. It appeared to be deserted, darker and dirtier than any street he'd ever seen, its curbs piled with trash and litter.

He felt a deep longing for the Philadelphia of his childhood, for the smell of fresh-cut grass, for the fragrance of lilac blossoms in the spring, for the deep, rich laughter of his family on front-porch summer evenings.

A sudden impulse overwhelmed Wilt, and he bolted away from the Bonedome, sprinting down the sidewalk as fast as he could run. The night air rushed over his face. He laughed, racing into a dark and ruined world, brushing past death with every stride.

* * *

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10.

"LOOK AT the monitor! One of the repros just broke out of the dream field!"

"But . . . but that's not possible!"

11.

FLASHING LIGHTS. Not neon — something softer than neon. Softer and airier. So airy! And so many colors! He'd come off a dark, twisting street into an open place pulsating with soft multicolored lights, some sort of plaza or marketplace or park; and as his eyes adjusted to the light, he realized the place, whatever it was, was teeming with people and robots and other creatures halfway between the two; and it seemed then to Wilt that surely he was falling into the wound where the blue flutes play.

He'd stopped running. He'd stopped thinking. He stood there catching his breath. He ran the tip of his tongue around the inside of his mouth and felt something like a little feather growing out of the soft inside flesh of his cheek.

"Welcome, holomeat dream repro brother," came a crackly voice from his feet.

Looking down, Wilt saw six eyes gazing up at him from the face of a creature of fur, flesh, and plastic.

"It is *carnival* in Cleveland, no? Time for all the metal mummers to dance, yes? Look! Here come the housebot samba schools!"

A fantastic procession came dancing out of an alleyway, weaving across the plaza toward Wilt. The music of conga drums and guitars rolled over him in a warm, drunken wash; and other music, too, music from instruments he couldn't identify, music that sounded like the chatter of parrots and monkeys in a Brazilian jungle. Little firecrackers and light ripples of laughter exploded gaily all around him. The dancers swept closer in the winding line, and then they were there: undulating in front of Wilt, the dark, swirling magic of Latin passion inside metal hearts made real before his astonished eyes.

"Look!" cried the voice at Wilt's feet. "The first school is the school of vacuum cleaners!"

Most of the vacuum cleaners rolled forth low and flat on many wheels,

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their sleek beetle hulls covered with dilating orifices out of which sprang attachments, hoses striking out at the night air like excited cobras. A few of the vacuum cleaners were tall and vaguely human in form. They wore pink silk blouses and bright green pantaloons. Their cheeks were painted with luna moths. They snapped attachments out of their fingers this way and that, tossing serpentines and confetti into the crowd, clacking castanets, writhing and bobbing and swivel-hipping forth; and some of them tapped on drums; and all of them sang, their voices rising together in a feverish, sweet lament of metallic clicks and clacks and deep, sucking inhalations.

"Look!" cried the voice at Wilt's feet. "The second school is the school of kitchen bots!"

Kitchen bots! Dressed in vermilion ruffles and black tights, they rode athletically this way and that, flexing their attachments, posturing and pantomiming for the crowd, out of rhythm with each other, yet somehow creating an overall effect that was pleasing to the eye. Dish towels flapped in Wilt's face, and plates sailed out over the crowd, crashing grandly behind him. The crowds cheered, and the kitchen bots sambaed forth, spraying both sides of the street with cleansers and warm water, laughing and pounding sponges against their sparkling clean hulls.

"Look! The third school is the school of bathroom bots!"

When Wilt saw the bathroom bots, his toe started tapping. He just couldn't help it. His knee began to bend in time to the music. Suddenly his fingers were snapping, and he was bobbing and swaying with the drums, whistling, clapping his hands, leaping in amongst the dancing machines and dancing along with them, lost in a sea of tangerine streamers and brightly colored toucan and rhea feathers, awash in the plunge plunge plunge of a complex samba rhythm, invigorated, energized, shot full of life, glad to let these lowliest of machines lead him back through the ruined city toward the giant dog-biscuit shape of the Bonedome.

As Wilt danced along with the bathroom bots, he felt entirely lifted out of himself. Something snapped, like a Möbius rubber band, or perhaps the elastic of the human soul. And then he knew.

He was no longer a dream repro.

He was real.

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12.

THE SCOREBOARD read Borgs 102, All-Stars 79 with only a little over six minutes to play. As Wilt neared the bench, Coach Bird snarled and shook his walker.

"Where the hell *you* been? What the hell you grinnin' for? And what's that strange look in your eyes? Wait a sec. Holy shit. You're *feelin'* it, aren't ya!"

"Put me in, Coach," said Wilt. "I can win this game."

And he did.

13.

SOMEONE IS dreaming. Someone named Herbie.

Herbie is Herbie. That's for sure. In this dream, Herbie is surrounded by the Up With America Coca-Cola Freedom Singers. Hundreds of them. They're all armed with butcher knives, crowbars, ice picks, and chain saws. Some are wearing ghastly masks made out of stitched-together pieces of human skin.

But Herbie has grown large and terrible. He wears a suit of lightweight armor and holds two chain saws of his own, one in each hand, their blades singing.

"C'mon, you bastards!" he roars. "Just try to come and get me!"

As they close in on him, Herbie feels exultant. Waves of savage ecstasy surge through his body.

That's the nice thing about Herbie's dreams nowadays. Ever since that last big job for Holomeat, he can *feel* again.

14.

AND WHAT of Wilt?

After the dream, when the holomeat projector was turned off, all his teammates vanished — but he remained.

Now he wanders the ruined streets of Cleveland, a lonely giant who must sleep each night in a different makeshift shelter. Food is hard to find, and the search for it takes most of his time.

Even so, Wilt carries with him a basketball. He longs for a pickup

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game in a park or a schoolyard. But in every park and schoolyard, the hoops have been torn down, and the asphalt is covered with shantytowns. From sagging Styrofoam and cardboard shacks, moaning creatures extend hands that look like the claws of a crab — as though Wilt in his own distress could give them something.

Wilt realizes that it is only the *old* city that is ruined. In amongst the wreck and rubble, translucent domes glowing with milky light protrude from the asphalt and concrete. At the top of each dome, there's a hatchway, and Wilt figures these are the ceiling points of a vast underground community. When the hatches open, usually odd-looking winged vehicles fly forth. Only on the rarest of occasions does someone walk out, and then only briefly, always in some sort of armor or special suit. Wilt begs these persons to let him in, but they ignore him, and he has discovered no way to pry open or break asunder the hatchways.

Everything in the barren wilderness of the city above ground shines with a strange, sickly green light. Wilt's skin itches, and he worries about radiation. Even though he has an excellent visual memory, he cannot find his bearings. Day after day he wanders aimlessly back and forth through the dead and dying slums.

At night, Wilt sobs himself to sleep. He dreams he's seven again, hiding under a lilac bush in Philadelphia. The city of brotherly love. But the dream always ends, and Wilt awakes. At least he thinks he's Wilt. The only thing he knows for sure is that he's someone who's lost in a reality stranger than any dream, lost in a city of the future that cannot be understood.

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In this dark and masterful tale, Johnny Mays is a cop who likes to crack heads; he's a guy who makes his own excitement. But he is also a man who can really hold a grudge. When he's out to even up a score, nothing *can stop him. . . .*

RIBBON OF DARKNESS, OVER ME

By Stephen Gallagher

"WHAT DO YOU THINK to that one?" Johnny Mays said, and I had to turn and look across the top of the car to see what he meant. I was gassing up the Granada, and he'd stepped out to loiter against its side on the filling-station forecourt, his tie loosened and his arms folded. Johnny wore good clothes, but he always looked as if he'd slept in them; he had the air of a lounge lizard perpetually in transit between lounges, rumpled and always faintly surprised to find that the world carried on turning through the daylight hours.

I followed his look across to the next aisle on the forecourt, where a woman was unhooking the four-star pump to feed a hungry Porsche. I didn't have to wonder which of the two, the car or its driver, Johnny was meaning. I knew him well enough by then.

"Too classy for you," I said. I didn't know if she could hear us or not.

"You reckon?"

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"I reckon."

He considered further, making no effort to disguise what he was thinking. At my guess, the woman was somewhere in her mid-thirties and fighting it too hard, a bleach blonde with a deep suntan, white trouser suit and white shoes, and a little too much gold around her hands. She'd turned to face away from us, perhaps deliberately.

Johnny said, "That isn't class. That's just town money."

"Whatever," I said. "You still wouldn't get your nose past the door."

He thought it over for a while longer.

And then he said, "Watch me."

I couldn't stay for this. Johnny was a mad bastard. I could imagine him ambling over to a bomb and giving it a kick, just out of curiosity to see if it was live; he always seemed to get away with it, but, what the hell, I was only a bystander here. As he stuck his hands into his pockets and sauntered over to the next aisle, I made for the forecourt office to sign the book on the firm's account. If anything happened, I'd see it through glass and from the counter at a distance, and in safety.

What I actually saw was nothing much. The woman's hair was whipped across her face by the wind when she looked up to speak to him. She brushed it away with her free hand. She didn't smile. Johnny gestured out toward the skyline of tower blocks and dark clouds crowding low; it had to be either something about the threat of thundery weather, or else he was asking how she came to be passing through this blighted side of the city.

Either way, it didn't seem to be working.

Johnny was sitting in the Granada when I got back to it, seat reclined a few degrees and his head tilted back on the rest. "Poor girl," he said. "She's a sad case. Frigid as polar bear crap, no hope for her at all."

"What did she say to you?"

"Just drive. Pull out onto the street and wait."

"For what?"

"I'll tell you as we go."

So I started the Granada and did as he'd said; we were equal partners, but somehow it was always Johnny who made the running. And as we emerged from under the radio shadow of the station's metal awning, the speaker on the dash faded into life to mark our reentry into the city police network.

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Johnny picked up the mike and logged us back into service.

"What now?" I said.

"Just wait."

The Porsche came out about a minute later.

Johnny said, "Warp factor six, Mr. Sulu," and I said, "You want me to follow her?" And Johnny turned to me and gave me an infinitely pained look.

"Yes," he said, "I want to follow her. Preferably today. Get right up close, so she'll see us in the mirror."

It was a four-lane highway cutting straight through the badlands toward the heart of town, and so there was no difficulty in finding a space and sliding in behind the Porsche. There isn't much of any rear window in those sporty jobs, but I could just see her as she glanced at her mirror and then glanced again, quickly, when she realized that we weren't just another car in the traffic. Now she was obviously beginning to wonder what we might have in mind.

I was kind of curious myself.

The road dropped into a concrete underpass, yellow lights zipping over our heads like tracer bullets, and as the Porsche started to pick up speed, I matched it and stayed on her tail. This wasn't a part of town where anyone would care to be stopped and in trouble; extensively bulldozed and worked-over in the sixties building boom, it now had the atmosphere of a long-abandoned landing field for airships that had never arrived. After about a quarter mile, we came up into a daylight that somehow seemed darker than the tunnel that we'd just left; it was grim enough to have triggered the photocells in some of the high overhead floods so that they burned like new stars against an iron-gray sky.

She was starting to get worried now, looking for a way out.

Radio reception had ghosted away again as we'd gone belowground, but now, as it returned, Johnny unshipped the mike and gave our call sign. There was about a ten-second lag before the dispatcher responded.

"Car license details," he said. "Requesting confirmation on name and address and anything outstanding." And then, holding the mike in plain sight and leaning forward to get a look at the Porsche's plate, he read off the registration.

"You're too much," I said.

Johnny grinned happily. "I am, aren't I?" he said, and as he waited for

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the details to come through, he fumbled around inside his jacket and brought out the Little Black Book. It was while he was adding the woman's address to whatever current list he was keeping in its pages that I saw the Porsche suddenly swing over into an exit lane at the last possible moment, no signal or anything. I could have stayed with her, but a quick check on Johnny told me that his eyes were off the road. I let her go, and Johnny didn't see until it was too late for him to object. He had what he wanted by now, anyway. We stayed on the level, and the Porsche ran parallel for a ways, rising on an elevated ramp that wasn't taking her home but would put some distance between her and us. Johnny finished his notebook entry with a flourish, closed it, and then clicked the little ballpoint pen that came with it.

I said, "What's the idea?"

"Just for the record," Johnny said, and as he stowed the book, he smiled pleasantly across the increasing gap between the two vehicles. I saw the blonde give him a brief, cold stare, and then the ramp took her up and beyond our eyeline.

They don't like it when you abuse the license data, but most of the officers that I knew had done it at some time or another. Back when I'd been in uniform, one of the oil companies had been running a promotional campaign where they'd displayed random lists of car registrations out on different garage forecourts, with cash payouts if you spotted your own number anywhere in there; some of the boys had done pretty well out of tracking down owners and doing a deal for half of the prize money in return for telling them where to claim, until somebody decided to complain to the chief constable about it. Everything had tightened up for a while after that, but these things don't last forever.

We stayed on the main road and reached the town center just in time to meet the beginnings of the rush-hour traffic coming out. By then we were only five hours into a twelve-hour shift, with all of the evening ahead and an electricity in the air that promised us an interesting time. It was warm; it was close; it was like a darkening lid being slowly pressed down onto the city. We'd sensed it first that afternoon, out in the deck-access estate where we'd been sent to check on an elusive Irishman suspected of handling stolen goods. Talk about a rough area; I don't know what happens to people who have to live in places like that, but I always think about rats eating their young when they're put under the same kind

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of conditions. We'd been descending in the open stairwell, when I'd glanced out at exactly the same moment that a TV set, power lead trailing behind it like the tail of a kite, had been falling past on its way down from one of the upper decks. Johnny had said, "What the fuck was that?" and I'd said, "It could have been a Sony. It went by too fast to be sure." The TV tube had imploded when it hit the ground three floors below, and after only a moment's lag, it had seemed to be answered by the first far-off echoes of thunder from somewhere out toward the coast. We'd looked over the rail to where the busted set lay in amongst the split bags of garbage and the rest of the crap that regularly got dumped out into space, and saw that already about half a dozen dirty-faced kids had come swarming in to see what was new.

Mad-dog weather, Johnny had called it. He'd said, "I bet we're going to have some fun tonight."

But it was a long time in coming.

Back at the office I wrote up a couple of entries for the minor crime book while Johnny put in some work on the divisional information sheets, and then we took a break down in the canteen before hauling ourselves all the way back up the stairs to attend a meeting with our inspector. He'd spent the afternoon in court and was in a lousy mood, and he kept us there for over an hour, talking about nothing that either of us was able to remember afterward. It was midevening before we were released for patrol duties, and we headed out to the yard and the cars like a couple of kids being let loose at a fair.

We got two burglaries that turned out to be faulty alarms. We got one mugging. We picked up two Animal Liberationists who'd spray-painted a furrier's window on King Street, and half an hour after that, we had to return to give a warning to the furrier, who was shouting and screaming on the pavement in front of his display. It had none of the makings of a classic shift, and when, around eleven, Johnny suggested that we should go and roust the crowd in the Buckingham, I was ready to go along. The Buckingham had been a gay bar since back in the days when fairies were what you put on Christmas trees, and harassing the clientele had become something of a tradition in the service over the years.

But I don't think our hearts were really in it anymore. I stood to one side while Johnny was talking to a young man in biker gear who'd probably never been on a bike in his life, and I looked at the faces around us;

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they were watching patiently and without expression, waiting for us to do our number and then leave so that they could get on with their lives. Out of all the crowd, it seemed that we were the ones who were being tolerated.

Times change, I suppose.

Afterward, Johnny said, "Sometimes I get the feeling that there's no joy in the job anymore," and he slammed the Granada's door hard when he got in.

"Talk about edgy," I said to him. "All day long you've been like a man trying to piss razor blades."

He shrugged. "I don't know what it is. I think it's in the air."

"Nothing to do with this afternoon?"

"The Snow Queen?" he said, and then he looked away out of the open side window. "I'd forgotten all about her."

Our final call of the night came when we were pulled in behind a late-opening snack wagon on the bridge by the railway. The call was to check on a report of an abandoned car, a BMW spotted by a minicab driver on some empty street around in the shadow of the old town gasworks. Johnny queried the call and asked if there weren't any uniformed units available, but he was told that all the uniforms had been deployed in an incident over at the bus station.

"Great," Johnny said as he returned the mike to its cradle. "You're all wired up to crack some heads, and what do you get? The first piece of action all night, and it goes to the woodentops."

We found the car as we'd been directed, in a demolition area where the houses were gone and only the street pattern remained. The report on the make had been accurate, a recent-model BMW with some bad scrapes along one side and its rear window broken. It was nose-in to the pavement with its tail about a yard or more into the road; abandoned by kids on a joyride when it ran out of fuel, was our guess, and when we looked inside, we could see that more damage had been caused when the radio had been levered out. Otherwise, it seemed to be intact and still drivable, although if we'd left it on the street for much longer, the morning would probably have found it minus the wheels and its battery. I brought the spare can from the trunk of the Granada while Johnny messed with the wires that had been left hanging under the dash. You'd get kids of twelve and thirteen who could dismantle a steering lock and hot-wire an ignition in about

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three minutes flat. Johnny took about the same to get it going again, and then he sat blipping the pedal and listening to the engine note. If it had been my car, I wouldn't have wanted to see it again.

Back at the office, Johnny stood at the window while I wrote up the paperwork. He seemed no more settled than he had been all evening. I assumed at first that he was watching the brief summer lightning that had begun to vein the sky some way out over the ridge of hills that stood between us and the next county, but then I heard sounds of disturbance from down in the yard and moved over to take a look for myself. It was the Transit vans with their haul from the bus station, five gangling and beaten-up youths who were trying to look defiant with their arms up their backs and their feet barely touching the ground. They weren't succeeding.

As the kids disappeared into the cell corridor, I said, "That couldn't have been much."

"It's about the only excitement we're likely to see tonight," he said absently, and then he glanced at his watch. "Unless you're game for some sport."

"What did you have in mind?" I asked him.

"The motoring kind," he said.

HE STOPPED the BMW right out in the center of the courtyard where the lights were brightest, killed the engine, and then walked back to where I was waiting in the unmarked Granada. Only half lit, the courtyard had been designed as a public space with the closed curve of the deck-access building fully encircling it; but it was too big and too windswept, and instead, it had simply become a common wasteland. Sitting there in our own car, I felt like I was on the sidelines of an abandoned arena in one of those Italian gladiator movies.

Johnny came around on my side and indicated for me to move over from behind the wheel. "I think my old grandmother drives with more daring than you do," he said. "And she's been dead for fifteen years."

This was in reference to our drive across town, where he'd nearly lost me twice because he'd gone through lights ahead of me. But what did he expect? He hadn't even told me where we'd been going. Only now, as I saw the setup, was I slowly beginning to get the idea.

It was after 1:00 A.M., and we were no longer on duty. The radio was off. Johnny revved the car and then backed off a couple of dozen yards farther

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into the entrance tunnel through which we'd come. There were others like it all around the circuit, brick arches that would catch sounds and turn them into echoes from some other world. With our lights just showing outside the tunnel, he kept the engine purring low, bringing it up to a beefy growl every now and again with a light pressure on the pedal.

"They'll never take us up on this," I said.

"Give them time," Johnny said. "They're thinking it over."

For ten minutes, perhaps longer, I watched the open galleries. They're called deck-access because of the open public walkway that runs along the front of each level, the levels being connected by a stairwell every hundred yards or so. They're terrible places: badly lit at night, impossible to police, easy to slip through without getting caught — you'd do better trying to pin down a rabbit in its own warren. They'd never been popular, and at last the local administrators were beginning to get in line with the idea; wherever I looked, I could see runs of wooden X's where flats had been vacated and then nailed up to keep out squatters. It was against the lighter color of the plywood boarding that I caught the shadow shapes as they moved on one of the levels, the first sign of interest since our arrival.

I said, "I'm not even so sure that this is a good idea," and Johnny looked at me across the darkened car.

"If you're going soft on me," he said, "you'd better step out right now."

"I'm not going soft," I said.

"And I don't want to hear any complaining later, either."

Four of the shadows materialized into substance at the edge of the ring of light, only yards from the BMW. There was something eerie about the way that they'd moved down from the building, almost as if they'd simply faded from one place to reappear in another, but I knew that this was only a trick of the light and the hour. They were kids going on teenagers, but washed-out and ageless under the sodium glare; one of them, I'd swear, was no more than eight years old, but apart from his size, he moved and he acted exactly like the others.

Johnny revved a couple of times, and, as one, the four of them looked toward us. Nobody nodded or gave any kind of sign, but all the same we knew that the challenge had been taken. They piled in, and the BMW was running barely more than ten seconds later.

"Not too shabby," Johnny said. "For scum."

The skill that they'd shown in starting the car wasn't immediately

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evident in the way they drove; they revved too hard and crashed the gears several times before the BMW lurched forward. We followed them out through one of the tunnels opposite and onto the road, Johnny staying well back and giving them a chance to get the feel of the strange car. We'd been with them for almost half a mile before they found out how to turn the lights on. They were slow, and their progress was ragged, weaving from side to side and clipping the paving when they rounded a corner; whenever they passed under a streetlight, we'd see them in shadow play on the milky rear window, arguing and gesturing in what was obviously a team effort.

They seemed to be heading away from town, in the direction of the motorway.

"A lot of use that's going to be," Johnny said, "if they can't even find their way out of second gear."

We could hear the whining protest of the BMW's engine above our own, even though Johnny had fallen back a hundred yards or more. At this distance, should a uniformed patrol cut into the chase, we could simply fade away. It wouldn't look good to be chugging along behind a carload of obvious offenders at the speed of a milk-float, waiting for them to get their act together so that we could start a decent hot pursuit.

But then they managed to shift up, this time without crashing the gears, and where the BMW had been was suddenly just smoke.

"That's more like it," Johnny said, and we took off so hard that I felt as if the floor had been pulled out from under me.

The kid who was at the wheel seemed to find it easier to steer straight at speed; not that it was easy for me to tell, because he'd grabbed such a lead on us that we could see only his taillights in the distance. But it was a distance that Johnny was working quickly to close. The road that the kids had chosen was long and straight and led to nowhere other than a big motorway intersection and the trading estates that had clustered around it on the very edge of town where the land was cheapest. At this time of night, the estates were dark, their big parking lots empty, and the deep cut of the motorway glowed in the allure of a firefly. The kids had two choices, the coast or the mountains.

They went for the mountains.

Before they'd built the motorway, there had been only two routes that would get you over into the next county without having to swing all the

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way to the south, and these were narrow little passes that could be guaranteed to get snowed up every winter. The new road had changed all of that, six lanes slamming up through some wild terrain where there had previously been nothing but sheep and stones and open moorland, and the occasional farm in those few places where there was enough shelter. Most of the farms were now ruins. Once over the top, you'd cross the border and come down along the side of a valley that had been dammed in stages to make it into a series of descending shelves of water, stored-up life for those mill towns whose lights would seem to merge across the open country ahead.

But that was a good fifteen, sixteen miles before us. Right now we were climbing steadily in the long haul up the lower slopes, passing an almost solid line of trucks and night-freight haulers that were rumbling along nose-to-tail like circus elephants in the slow lane. We'd lost a little more ground to the BMW in finding a gap to get on, but now the Granada was eating it up.

We eased up behind them and stayed there for a while, pacing them. In a straight bet on flat-out speed, I'd have put money on the BMW, but these were kids whose driving skills were based on word of mouth and scant practice in stolen cars. They'd probably know as much about sex, and be about as good at it. It also wouldn't help that the BMW's engine had taken a serious battering at the hands of another set of joyriders already. Johnny swung into the outside lane and moved up alongside, slick and smooth and with no more than a couple of feet of space between the cars.

I looked across. Nobody looked back or met my eyes. I revised my estimate on the kid at the wheel; he'd be about fifteen, but so skinny and stunted that you'd take him for less at a distance. He was gripping the wheel hard with both hands, while in the passenger seat alongside him, a younger boy sat ready with his hands on the gearshift. Their faces were lined like those of old, old men.

"This ought to make them notice us," Johnny said, and without warning, he twitched the wheel and made a feint as if to ram them sideways. I grabbed at the armrest, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw the BMW slide away as the fifteen-year-old overreacted. They seemed to be dropping into the immense maw of a big articulated rig only a few yards behind us, but an earth-shuddering blast of the rig's horn sent them bouncing out again like the silver ball on a pinball machine. For a few seconds I could

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see them swinging wildly from side to side, but then they'd slipped back out of my line of sight and I lost them.

Johnny was watching his mirror. Our speed began to fall. I turned a little in my seat and saw the BMW close behind and getting closer, and then, without any warning, Johnny briefly stabbed at the brakes so that the gap between us abruptly snapped down from yards almost to inches. My belt pulled tight and my insides threatened to flip, and the kid in the BMW overreacted again and slammed on all of the anchors so hard that his tires seemed to scream with the agony of it.

Johnny moved out a lane, dropped down, and slid back alongside them again.

"That's better," he said.

Three of them looked back at us in terror now, one spark of emotion in each pair of dead little eyes in each of their death-camp faces; only the youngest seemed not to have grasped what we were getting down to here, and he was grinning wildly to show teeth so rotten that they didn't look real.

Then, *bang*, they were away.

"Thank God for that," Johnny said, speeding up in pursuit again. "They finally found top gear."

The convoy in the slow lane had begun to thin out as we came up onto open moorland through a man-made gorge of sheer rock, the gaps between the trucks and the sixteen-wheelers increasing as the road leveled. This was about as bleak and bitter as it would get. The way I'd heard it, the angles on the road surfaces for this stretch had been calculated so that winter blizzards would scour their own snow away to keep it clear. That would be months away, but even now, as we came out of the gorge, I could feel the Granada rocking slightly in the airflow. I glanced at the speedometer, and in the glow of the dash illumination, I could see that it was hovering somewhere around the 100 mark. Then Johnny's hand moved, and I couldn't see a damn thing.

He'd killed all the lights.

We could see with no problem, but we couldn't be seen; we were just a fast-moving shadow that came up behind the BMW and then suddenly exploded in light and noise as Johnny put the beams on full and leaned on the horn. I'd swear that the car in front of us lifted six inches off the road in shock. If I'd been inside the BMW, I'd have needed a pacemaker and a new pair of pants.

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Johnny said, "They should've gone for the back roads. This is getting boring." But then, just as he spoke, we both of us spotted a little black hole that had appeared off-center in the BMW's shattered rear window. We watched with an odd fascination as the hole grew bigger, much as you'd watch something hatching its way out of an egg; except that the ugly duckling that emerged was the eight-year-old, chipping the edges of the glass away with what looked like a screwdriver.

"What are they doing?" Johnny said, but I couldn't see anything more than he could. Two of the others were moving around inside with a definite sense of purpose, but that was about all we knew, until the BMW's spare wheel was abruptly manhandled up through the rough opening and then released to slide down the trunk lid. I can only assume that they must have torn the rear seat apart to get through to it; Johnny must have been as taken aback as I was, because he reacted almost too late as the spare hit the road edge-on and came bouncing up with terrific energy straight toward us. Johnny swerved, and we heard a glancing bump on the side of the car, much as you'd get with a blow from a well-wrapped fist, and the Granada rocked so hard with the maneuver that for a moment I was sure that we were going to turn over.

It had to be luck, because I don't believe that their timing could have been that good; but as Johnny was fighting to keep all four wheels on the tarmac and the rogue spare was bouncing off to become a hazard for someone else, the BMW was taking the first exit to come along in the past five miles.

We overshot, of course.

At least Johnny got us onto the hard shoulder before he slammed into reverse. I could see them down below, slowing and stopping under the lights at the end of the exit road, and I wondered what they were planning to do. Abandon the car? That was the usual procedure with in-town joyriders. As soon as they were pinned to a halt, they'd stop and fling the doors open and disperse like fleas out of a rug — but this was the middle of nowhere, and it hardly seemed like an option. But then, as Johnny lost patience and turned the Granada forward so that we lurched down the grass embankment to cut straight across to them, I could see that only one of the doors was open and only one of the figures was out; the youngest, I could see through a shaking that was threatening to loosen all my teeth, and he was putting up a fierce fight against his expulsion. A hard shove

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sent him sprawling back, the door slammed, and the BMW was gone before he could bounce up again. He was dancing with rage as we came through only a few seconds behind, more a strange little monkey-man than a child, and he showered us with dirt and turf grabbed up in handfuls from the roadside.

Johnny didn't even glance back. All of his attention was for the car ahead.

I could only keep thinking: One of them had pushed his little brother out.

And I said, "Let's call it quits, Johnny."

"I don't call it quits with shit," Johnny said, changing down fast as the road began to climb again. "Tonight they get to learn what life's all about." And I looked at him, and I swear, without the green reflecting up onto his face from the dash, his eyes would have been burning with a light all of their own.

We were going on up, this time on a narrow lane between dry-stone walls that had crumbled in places. The gaps had been patched with wire, and when I glanced back, it was through one of these that I could just see the lit ribbon of the motorway dropping from sight in the distance below us. Now it was just two cars heading on into a darkness relieved only by the occasional dart of lightning that revealed endless moor to either side.

We were right on their tail again as the road crested out and began to drop. Our lights blazed into the stark interior of the BMW and picked out the three remaining kids in sharp detail. The one who was now alone in the ruined backseat turned to look at us, his face twisted in terror and with tears streaming clean lines down the grime on his cheeks as he screamed something at us that the wind carried away.

And I heard Johnny say softly, "Yeah, that'll do nicely."

He began to pressure them harder. They were all over the place, while Johnny was keeping the Granada under such tight control that we might have been on rails. The BMW wobbled, and sparks flew from the stonework to one side. Its brake lights came on, and Johnny had to stamp down hard to avoid a pileup; but then the BMW's lights cut completely, and the car suddenly disappeared from view.

It was like some conjuring trick. It took several seconds to dawn on us that it had even happened, and then we stopped, and Johnny cut the engine.

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I said, "Where did they go?"

And Johnny, winding down his window, said, "Beats me."

We sat in silence for a few moments. I listened for thunder, but none came. Johnny was listening more intently than I was, and for different sounds.

I said, trying to sound neither too hopeful nor too shaky, "Game over?"

And at exactly that moment, some stray breeze brought us a noisy gear change from a racing engine about a mile down and away across the moor.

"Apparently not," Johnny said, and reached for the key again.

Backing up slowly, it was easier to see how the stunt had been managed. There was a single-lane road going off to the right, a sharp turn descending at such a steep angle that the BMW had simply dropped out of sight too fast for the move to be seen. As we made to follow, lightning briefly illuminated moorland falling away and a sheen of dammed water some way farther down. When thunder rolled a few seconds later, it seemed shockingly close after having been a part of the background for so many hours; and for some inexplicable reason, I thought of that falling TV set, and of the way that the thud of its implosion had seemed to be answered from far away as if some cub had called to its mother.

We followed the parallel scars of the BMW's tires all the way down the dirt road. We passed a couple of Water Authority signs, but nothing to indicate that the track was ever used much. At the bottom was the reservoir that we'd seen, black water puckering in the rain; here the track swung left to cross the dam.

The dirt scars didn't. They went straight out to the edge, and ended there.

For more than a minute, we stood on the dam and stared out into nothing, the skies above us trembling so hard that the ground itself seemed to be shaking in unison. It was when I went back to the car for a flashlight that the rain started, a few fat drops that became a steady drumming that became an all-in-one dump of water that had soaked me within five strides. And it kept on coming.

Johnny took the light. I couldn't bring myself to aim it down. The rain was a dense shower of silver darts through the beam, which showed a grass bank so steep that I wouldn't have cared to tackle it without a rope even if the conditions had been ideal. Beyond that the light just wasted itself out in nowhere, almost as if we were shining it into a bottomless pit.

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I said, "What are we going to do?"

"We go back and we tear up the paperwork," Johnny said. The Granada's headlights were at his back, and I couldn't see his face, but his voice was calm. "We took the call, but we never found any car. We were never here tonight. This didn't happen."

By now my clothes had soaked through the skin. It was as we were getting back into the Granada that I heard him say, "*Now* I think they've got the message."

I suppose it's inevitable that you're not going to have a very good opinion of yourself when your major reassessment is made facing a washroom mirror having just thrown up in the basin. I looked like the newspaper that a dog had been trained on. It was 3:00 A.M., and, astonishing though it may seem, I'd reached the belated conclusion that perhaps Johnny Mays might be dangerous to be around.

We'd driven back slowly, and we hadn't done so much as run a red light. At first the wipers had barely been able to cope with the rain, but then it had eased back into something thinner and steadier; this was falling still, spattering on the washroom's frosted glass whenever a gust of wind threw it up against the building. Johnny and I had been a team for over a year. Others had warned me about him; I think "certifiable" was about the mildest comment that any of them had to make, but I'd liked him. We'd never fallen out, and we'd had some good times. From what I'd gathered on those few occasions that our talk had strayed onto personal grounds, he was a country boy whose people farmed land somewhere to the north. He almost never went home to visit them. He'd hit the city at a run and had taken to its ways as if they were the answer to every frustration that he'd ever known. He seemed open, but he wasn't; he angered easily; and he never forgot a slight.

But if having him as a friend no longer seemed such a good idea, I hated to think what he'd be like to have as an enemy.

When I came out of the washroom, he was back from wherever he'd been, and he was working on the three-number combination of someone else's locker. I asked him what he was doing, and he said, "Burgling Bruno. I've watched him working the combination; it's just a straight three nines. Probably about as complex a sequence as he can trust himself to remember."

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According to Johnny, Ralph Bruneau — or Bruno, as everybody called him — was barely one step away from the old men who argued over bottles of Woodpecker cider in the park when they weren't out in the shopping center asking for pennies. Personally, I'd never seen him drink, let alone drunk. All that we found in his locker was a six-ounce silver hip flask with "To Dad" engraved on the side, and a small amount of spirits within. Johnny made me take a belt, and after that I began to feel the color returning to my face.

Sitting on one of the wooden benches, I said, "What's the score?"

"I tore up the report and the copy. Burned the pieces in the incinerator in the ladies' room. Motorway desk had taken two calls from truck drivers, but they didn't get any details that could be traced back to us. It'll go down as just two joyriders racing. And when they find the wreck in the morning, they'll know who the losers were."

"Yeah," I said dispiritedly, and Johnny gave me a push on the shoulder.

"Hey," he said. "Were we magic, or what?"

"We were magic," I agreed. But it sounded pretty hollow.

We went down to where we'd left our own cars in the yard at the beginning of the shift. As you can probably imagine, the building was dead at that hour: a few forgotten lights burning in offices, but otherwise no signs of life beyond the receiving desk and the duty rooms. The yard was similarly empty: high-walled, long and narrow, with a grim stone Victorian arch at its end giving out onto the street. It had the original cobbles, and they were as slippery as hell in the drizzle. We were both parked over by an Accident Prevention van that had been standing there for three days awaiting garage work. Somebody had run into it.

Johnny was getting into his Capri, and I was wondering which would disappear first, the floor of my Mazda or my bank overdraft, when I saw him freeze and then slowly straighten again, the way that TV actors do when somebody pulls a gun on them. He was staring down the yard, and when I looked back over my shoulder, I saw the reason for his reaction.

There was a BMW on the street, just beyond the arch. Its engine was running, and the car was steaming faintly. It hadn't been there a moment before, and I hadn't heard it pull in. Three figures stood beside it. They were haloed in the rain and the light from the arch flood just above them, and their faces were in shadow.

One of them raised a hand. He seemed to beckon, but it was an odd

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The car that had sailed off the top of a dam now stood without a scratch.

gesture, a kind of impatient wave of recognition that had been turned in on itself. I looked at Johnny, and I saw Johnny nod once.

And then he looked at me and said, "We'll use my car. It's faster."

"Count me out," I said, and he cocked his head slightly, as if he didn't quite believe what he was hearing.

"You're in this with me," he said. "You don't back out now."

"Watch me," I said.

Those boys were dead. The car that had sailed off the top of a dam with them inside now stood without a scratch and purred like a cat. It was 3:15 on the worse night of my life, and I was ready to believe anything.

"Believe this," Johnny said. "I'm going to remember what you just did."

I showed him my open hands, and I stepped well back. I wanted no part of any of it. His eyes told me more than I could possibly want to know about Johnny Mays and me from that night onward.

He went after them. I ran to the archway behind him and watched as the two cars disappeared into the rain; the BMW had already been out of sight when Johnny had emerged, but I was just in time to see it back up and show its taillights for him to follow.

And Johnny followed, like a blind man with a hold on the end of a rope.

The rope that was going to hang him, I reckoned. But of course Johnny didn't see that.

"I hate coming in this place," Ralph Bruneau told me. "I think I hate the music they play more than anything else about it. Bless you."

"Thanks," I said. We were on an escalator taking us to the upper level of the Arndale shopping center for which they'd sacrificed several blocks on the main street of the city. Bruno obviously didn't think much of it.

"It's just an ant farm with Mantovani," he went on, looking back at the level that was dropping away below us. "People shouldn't be expected to live like this; it demeans them. What've you got, hay fever?"

"I got soaked in the rain a couple of nights back."

"That storm? I couldn't sleep through it. What were you doing out?"

"Making myself sorry."

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"Was that the night you had the bust-up with Johnny Mays? I heard that you'd put in an official request for a split."

"Just a personal thing," I said, and Bruno shrugged, unoffended.

"Fine by me," he said.

Bruno's regular partner had broken an ankle playing Sunday-league football, and so, with the two of us in a similar position, I suppose it was inevitable that they'd pair us up. Johnny hadn't turned in, and I hadn't seen him since that night. I'd gone around to his place the next afternoon and knocked, but there had been no reply; so then I'd lifted the corner of the hall carpet where he kept his spare key, and let myself in. I'd thought that I might have seen somebody moving in one of the rooms from the street outside, but there was nobody around and no definite sign to say whether he'd been back or not. The bed was an unmade mess, and there was a damp smell in the air as if a dog had peed somewhere around.

So then I'd driven out to the dam and taken a look at the place in daylight. Standing by the upper reservoir, I could look down to another, even bigger, man-made lake below. Levels were high, and the grass banking was so sodden that the tire tracks had blurred. It was just possible to make out that there wasn't just one set, but two.

But whom was I going to tell?

Now I had to tramp around with Bruno and make at least the occasional attempt to concentrate on what I was supposed to be doing. We were on some dull name-taking job around the traders in the shopping center; I don't even remember what any of it was for. He was absolutely right: the place was the architectural equivalent of a lobotomy. God knows how everybody would have got out if there had been a fire.

I blew up at one of the traders. I was trying to ask him a couple of simple questions, and he was telling me all about the cost of his rent, nothing of which I wanted to hear. Bruno led me away and then went back to patch things over, but I could see the trader darting looks at me from the safety of the other side of him. Whatever Bruno did, he did it well, and we left without the threat of a formal complaint.

When we were walking back out to the car, he said, "Must have been quite a falling-out that you two had."

"It was bad enough," I said.

"Like to tell someone about it?"

"I'd really rather not."

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He waited for me to get in and unlock the car, which we'd left half onto the pavement in a loading zone of windowless walls and graffiti-sprayed stockroom doors. Then, as he got in beside me, he said, "O.K., then I'll just say one thing. What you're doing is exactly right. Because someday soon that boy's in for a long fall, and he'd have taken you with him."

I was half tempted to tell him how close to the truth he was, but then he switched on the radio to log us back in, and my attention was caught by the tail end of a call.

It was something to do with suspicions of a neighbor concerning a locked property. I grabbed the mike before Bruno could reach it, and gave our call sign.

"We can take it," I said. "We're only a couple of streets away."

"A couple of streets?" Bruno echoed as I started the engine. "It's more than a mile."

Our wheels bumped down from the pavement as I lined us up for a U-turn.

"Not for long," I said.

Bruno didn't approve of the flats any more than he'd approved of the shopping center; he said that gold taps in the bathrooms and a Georgian door on the garage didn't make any difference — he knew cheap-shit building when he saw it. The call had brought us to a private development estate that reminded me of a student residential hall: red-brick apartments, walkways between the blocks, communal parking, shared staircases.... The only real difference lay in the price tag for a two-bedroomed shoe box with underfloor heating. I knew of a lot of lawyers who lived here, and a few minor TV people from the local station. It would have been too close to the middle of town for me, although that was supposed to be one of its biggest attractions.

The neighbor who'd phoned in met us at the foot of the stairs. A smallish man, sharp-featured and in his fifties. You could imagine Dr. Moreau going into the operating room with a ferret and coming out with him. He was wearing expensive slacks and one of those sport shirts with a little crocodile on it, and his gray chest hair looked like wire wool in the V of the collar.

As he led us up, he said, "It's been a couple of days now. Their milk keeps on coming, and I've been pushing their newspapers through. There's

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been a light burning in the bathroom as well."

Bruno said, "Do they always tell you if they go away?"

"Not always. They're away a lot. He has a company selling time-share apartments all over the continent."

"Time-share?" Bruno said. "Isn't that the kind of apartment where you buy a piece of a nice-looking place, and then fifty other families come in and kick the crap out of it?"

"I just bought one of the units myself," the neighbor said stiffly, but Bruno's smile didn't waver.

"What do you know," he said amiably.

On the top floor, three flights up, we rang the bell and waited.

"I've tried that," the neighbor said, and as Bruno explained to him why we had to handle it this way, I tried lifting the flap of the mail slot in case I might be able to see anything through it. Bruno asked if the occupants argued, and the neighbor said that he didn't know; they hadn't been together all that long.

I said, "Do you have a bread knife?"

He looked puzzled, confused, and slightly panicked. "Sorry?"

"I need a bread knife. Do you have one?"

He had to go back into his own place across the landing to fetch it, and when it came, I slid the blade through and used it to lift the privacy flap on the other side of the slot. I studied the view in Cinemascope for a few moments, and then called to Bruno to take a look over my shoulder.

Straightening, Bruno said, "Is there a master key to these places?"

There wasn't, so we broke the door in.

A middle-aged man lay at an uncomfortable angle against the wall to the right. A one-color rainbow arced, Magic Marker style, down the plaster, where his head had wiped as he'd fallen. I looked at the neighbor and said, "Is that the tenant?"

The neighbor blinked, his face all drained and slack, and said, "That's him."

"We're going to have to ask you to stay outside," Bruno told him, and the neighbor said quickly, "Don't worry."

Stepping carefully and touching nothing, we moved through into the main lounge. There were none of the instant signs of burglary. All of the furniture was new, and the pictures on the wall didn't appear to be prints, but originals. European landscapes mostly, but even they didn't give the

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place much of a personal touch. There were no photographs, no bric-a-brac. The kind of place you could imagine a business man moving into with his ex-mistress for a doomed second marriage.

Bruno said, "I hear water," and moved on through to look as I tried to guess what might have happened here. The doorbell rings; the tenant answers, never even sees the approach of the blow that kills him. It had happened in the early evening, at a guess; the fancy roller-blinds at the windows were pulled most of the way down, and there was a fierce red eye burning on the front of the compact-disk player in the rack system. You try something like that late at night in a place like this, and people too polite to bang on the ceiling serve you with an injunction instead.

I heard Bruno say, "Jee-*sus!*"

We bumped in the short corridor that led past the bedrooms to the bathroom, but Bruno was in too much of a hurry to pass me even to notice. What he'd heard was the running of the shower. The water had run cold, and there was no steam.

She was lying half dressed in the bath and with the shower beating down on her body. One leg dangled over the side. The instrument that had been used on her lay on the tiled floor. The deep color that I'd taken to be a solarium tan now proved to be authentic, as witnessed by the whitened strip across her hips; but by the same observation, I'd been right about her peroxide job. I could tell straightaway that there had been no robbery motive. She still had too much gold around her hands.

Oh, and something else. It looked as if she'd given birth to most of her own insides.

The instrument was a short wooden pole with a metal hook screwed into its end, identified as a home-made device for catching the rings on the blinds to draw them down when they were beyond reach. Two hours later, when the big murder machine was well in motion and the building was crawling with senior detectives and ancillary services, the device was being carefully picked up and bagged at about the same time that Bruno and I were being told that we were no longer needed.

We pushed our way out through police and press and cameras and the usual crowd of gawkers waiting to see the bodies emerge. Bruno could barely keep a cork on his fury, and before we got back to the car, it all came bursting out.

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"You recognized that address, and you knew we were going to find something there," he said. "You dragged us halfway across town for it. How did you know?"

"I didn't know anything," I said.

"Don't kid me. Say what you like about me behind my back, but don't insult my intelligence to my face. What's the setup?"

"Just a fluke."

Bruno stared at me, his expression hardening like concrete. Then he said, "It looks like what everybody says about you two jokers is true. But I'd always thought you were the steady one."

We didn't exchange another word during the short drive back to the yard, although I could have explained my certainty in two.

Johnny Mays.

Those boys had led him on to show him the place to which he'd sent them.

And now he'd come back, and he was baying at the moon.

I could think of only one way to confirm it. Back at the office, I got away from Bruno and went down to spend an hour with the Young Offenders book, and at the end of the time, I'd sorted out a couple of likely names. There were hundreds of known joyriders past and present, and a fair number of them had lived in and around the deck-access flats, but the flats were slowly emptying out, and few of the addresses were current.

I drove out there again, alone this time.

She let me in reluctantly, the front door opening straight into the main room. She wore a blue nylon coverall and carpet slippers, and although she couldn't have been much older than I, she looked as if she was about thirty-five going on sixty. She said that she'd been ill and that she'd had to give up her job on the old outdoor market because of it; her voice was hoarse enough to have been run through a grater.

The inside of the flat was unexpectedly neat and clean, but terrifically overdone, too much furniture crowded into too little space and a huge color TV dominating everything from one corner of the room. There were no pictures on the walls, just wallpaper in a palm-tree pattern, but on the sideboard about a dozen ready-made photo frames in different sizes were pushed together with a few pieces of mass-produced china.

Hoarse as she was, she wouldn't stop talking. Her son was a good boy,

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a good son to her. I tried to get a question in, and she showed me some object of indeterminate purpose from the mantelpiece, and explained how he'd made it at school with his own hands. When I asked if I could talk to him, she told me that he was out somewhere, probably doing some old lady's shopping or cleaning her windows. It was pretty clear that she was ready to give as many self-contradictory alibis as her offspring might require. Shoplifting I might have believed, but shopping? Do me a favor.

I said, "I heard that he hadn't been home in three days."

It was a speculative try on my part, but I saw it hit the target. But then she recovered and said, "He goes off sometimes. He goes to stay with his dad. But he always comes back."

So then I asked for the father's address, but all that she'd say was that he lived in a trailer near the beach somewhere in North Wales. As she was telling me this, I squeezed over to the sideboard and pretended a casual interest in the snapshot collection; one of them was a wedding photograph showing a wide-boy teenager alongside an averagely pretty girl whom I could barely connect with the woman alongside me. But it was the one next to this that interested me most, a professional studio shot of two boys in clean shirts and with their hair spit-combed and their smiles closed over their gappy teeth. I knew then for sure. One of the boys I'd last seen screaming wildly at me from the open back of the BMW. The other, I'd almost have sworn to it, was the eight-year-old; I hesitated a little because he looked so different when he was clean. In the picture his cheeks shone like apples.

I asked if I could speak to the younger boy instead, and she was explaining how he was out doing good works for the church, when a sound swung both of our heads to look at the door. For a moment we both stared, hypnotized by the little fingers that groped through the letter flap before catching hold of a string that hung there with a Yale key on its end; but then, as the string was being drawn through and the key was rising as if levitated, the woman suddenly shouted, "Go on, Billy! It's the police for ye!"

The sprung flap banged shut, and there was a crash as something was dropped outside, and I had to move fast as the woman reached to grab at my jacket. I shook her off and got to the door, and almost fell over a one-bar electric space heater that was lying on the walkway outside; something connected with Billy's good works for the church, I assumed.

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Billy himself had vanished, but when I ran to the nearest stairwell and listened, I could hear his running footsteps on the concrete somewhere above.

I climbed to the next deck, looked around. What I saw mostly was the plain wood of boarded windows, some graffiti spilling across the panels and onto the brickwork, and what I could hear was mostly the thin howling of the wind three floors above ground level. The open-sided gallery ran on in either direction, five yards wide and empty of all souls, until an elderly man stepped out of one of the few occupied flats. He stood there and stared at me, making no attempt to disguise his interest as I ran toward him.

"There was a boy," I said breathlessly. "Which way did he go?"

"Little bastard," he said with bitterness. "I'd show him."

"Just tell me which way."

"Soon as a flat's empty, they're in. I phone the police, and what happens?"

"*Which fucking way!*" I screamed at him, and saw him flinch back before the blast.

Just then I heard, "*No, mister, no!*" carried down to us from somewhere on the deck just overhead; and then, before I could move, Billy went by in free-fall on the far side of the rail. He passed within reach, but I'm not that fast. I got a quick flash-impression of him struggling like a sleeper caught up in invisible sheets, and then he'd gone. I resisted the impulse to look for him landing, run through with an instant shock wave that would pulp him inside his skin like a watch in a bag, and instead I ran back to the stairwell and up.

The next deck was the uppermost, nowhere higher to go, and it was empty; solidly boarded the full length of its frontage and knee-deep in trash and broken glass, it looked like wall-to-wall bomb damage. On the ply nearest to me, somebody called Gaz had written his name in dogshit. Now I went to the rail and looked down.

This must have been the spot from which he'd fallen; his flattened body was directly beneath me, a scruffy-kid doll beaten all out of shape with a single blow. A couple of stray mongrels had come sniffing around, curious but not daring to get too close. I saw other heads sticking out on other decks, and I saw at least two of these turn their faces up toward me.

Uh-oh, I thought as I saw their dawning anger, and headed back for

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the stairs with my search for Billy's assailant temporarily forgotten.

"I need your phone," I told the old man, who'd been goggling over the side like everybody else.

"It's at the back," he said, and he followed me into his dim and lace-curtained parlor with all its must and stale odors.

I said, "Lock that door and put a chair against it."

"What for?"

"Do it!"

The first few of them arrived a couple of minutes later, as I was completing my telephone request for urgent assistance; I could see their shadow shapes against the curtains, and their numbers were steadily growing. Somebody started rapping with a coin on the frosted-glass panel in the door, and then others joined in as the rumble of their voices increased. I'd already checked and knew that there was no other exit. "*Come out, yer bastard!*" I could hear somebody yelling as I strained my ears for the approach of sirens, and then the glass split and was punched in, and at least three arms came through groping for the catch. I dived for the chair and wedged it harder into place, and the unlocked door began to thump inward, showing a sliver of light along its edge with every charge.

I've had worse nightmares. But I can't offhand remember when.

THEY PUT me in one of the spare offices when they got me back. By then it had already begun to dawn on me that my treatment was halfway toward being that of a suspect, and not simply of an officer in attendance who'd had a bad shake-up. I'd been brought out through a crowd of women who'd screamed and spat and made grabs at me as I'd passed, but worse things had happened to me on the beat, and nobody had worried too much about it then. After a while, Bruno came in to talk to me. He closed the door gently behind him, almost as if somebody might be sleeping in the next room, and he set a pad of lined paper and a fibertip on the desk between us.

He said, "I have to take a statement from you."

"I don't get it," I said. "I'm being treated like I'm the accused."

"You know the form on something like this. I've got to tell you, not everything's hanging together. You go up; the kid comes down. How do you think that looks?"

"Like I'm damn lucky I've got a witness to back up my version."

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"And where was Johnny Mays when all this was happening?"

Bruno was watching me hard, his eyes the pale blue of an Arctic sky. Any temptation that I might have had to think that I could try running rings around him vanished in that moment.

"I don't have any idea," I said.

"That's a pity." He lowered himself to sit. "I was hoping that you were going to make it easier for both of us. Your witness says that you weren't on your own. He says he saw another officer going up ahead of you, although he gets hazy on the description."

"Why should he say a thing like that?"

"Why should he lie? We've got this. We've also got an unposted letter by a woman who died in her own bathtub on the night that she wrote it, addressed to the chief constable. It's a complaint about being harassed on the road by two men who were apparently police officers in a radio car. I checked with the registry. Johnny Mays called for her license details, but there was no official follow-up. The deeper I dig, the worse the smell gets . . . and I've barely started scratching yet."

He continued to watch me. His earlier anger had gone, and his manner wasn't hostile, but it was as if he'd unzipped the shambling outer Bruno and let the shell fade away to expose a tough, no-bullshit core.

"O.K.," I said, and I started to tell him my story.

After a while he stopped me, and we moved to a room with recording facilities, and I had to start all over again in the presence of an officer of senior rank.

Four hours later I was standing with Bruno on the bank of the lower reservoir, watching as Johnny Mays's Capri was winched up into the shallows with water pouring out of it at every seam. Police divers had found the car within half an hour of starting their search, and they'd put a hook onto the rear axle with a towline attached. It had come up easily, and to my eye, it hardly even appeared to have been damaged. The dam wall before us was almost as sheer as a cliff, and it made me giddy to look up and imagine the distance that the Capri must have fallen; the sky beyond its edge was a deep evening blue, and behind us some of the far-off cities' lights were already beginning to show up in the dusk. An extension of the search to look for the BMW was going to have to wait until morning, although there were obvious doubts over the likelihood of it being there at all.

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After all, dead kids couldn't have come back, could they?

My main feeling was one of relief, well disguised. Johnny Mays under six feet of water seemed a better proposition to me than the alternative; I'd woken up on both of the previous nights half expecting to go to the window and see the returned Capri in the street below with Johnny standing alongside it. He'd be looking up, and he'd make that little come-on gesture, and he'd smile an empty smile.

His last words to me in life had been, *I'm going to remember what you just did;* but seeing the car now, beaten and seeping and obviously undrivable, I felt oddly reassured. It was matter and it was here, and its brute presence was hardly the stuff on which bad dreams could be made.

But then one of the divers who'd been checking it over came trudging toward Bruno, stripping off layers of cold-water rubber as he moved. They'd had to use one of those fast little guns to blow the lock and open up the driver's door, causing one final outrush of water over the sill.

"There's nobody inside," I heard him say.

"Any sign of Mays getting out alive?"

"No sign of anybody getting out in any condition. The doors were all locked from the inside, and the windows closed, and the key still in the ignition. We've got a driven car, but we don't have the driver. I don't know how you explain that one at all."

Bruno looked at me.

"Me neither," I said.

But I suppose that I knew, well enough.

They let me go home, even though I tried to hint to Bruno that I didn't want to. In the morning they were going to go for a warrant to enter Johnny's flat, but I knew that they weren't going to find anything more solid than I had. I told them where they could find the key.

It was dark by the time that Bruno dropped me off at my own place. He pulled in on the other side of the street and waited with the engine running, not looking at me until I said, "Honestly, Bruno, I'd rather you left me anywhere but here tonight. At least take me back to the office so that I can pick up my own car."

He turned his head slowly, almost wearily, and gave me that kind of look that a well-heeled vagrant would get from someone who'd been asked for one handout too many.

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"Only my friends get to call me Bruno," he said, "and that doesn't cover retarded adolescents who sneak and snicker around behind my back and go through the things in my locker. You and Johnny Mays have been using this town as your own personal playground for too long. You've abused just about every privilege that comes with the job, and you seemed to think that you could carry on in the same way forever. I don't know how all this is going to end, but I'll tell you one thing: I hope you get everything that's coming to you."

"None of that was me," I said. "It was all Johnny."

"Yeah, and you were just along for the ride, saying, *Yes, Johnny* to everything. You've got a strange idea of innocence, and I've got to tell you, nobody else shares it. And I'm not your taxi service, so get out of my car."

He wouldn't even wait for as long as it took me to run across the street and let myself in.

The people downstairs were still in Tenerife, so no hope of company there. Above me in the smaller attic flat was a nurse who seemed to work even odder hours than I did; like it or not, I seemed to be alone. My place was most of the second floor in the converted house; it was bigger than I really needed, but that was mainly because the stenographer whom I'd originally talked into moving in with me had taken up with somebody else. Johnny had suggested that we could slip a few things into the system that would eventually find their way into a file on this new man in her life, and I'd said, *Yeah, let's put him down as a willy-wobbler.* Suspicion of indecent exposure wouldn't exactly be a career plus in the résumé of a language teacher in a girls' school, and, out of all of the wrongs that Johnny had ever led me into, this was the one that I was probably going to find hardest to regret.

I double-locked the door and went around checking all the windows before I put on any of the lights. I tried to tell myself that there hadn't been any trace of pond slime on the outside of the doorknob, that I'd only imagined it, but still I had to go into the bathroom and scrub my hand with a nailbrush under hot running water. I scalded it so badly that I then had to coat it with salve and wrap it in Kleenex because I didn't have any bandages; and as I was doing this, I glanced up in the bathroom mirror and saw my own face like that of a panicking stranger. Hey, I thought, look at me. The steady one.

I didn't like the silence, and so I turned on the radio. But then I was

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afraid that somebody would be able to get up close to me and I wouldn't hear until it was too late, and so I turned the volume so low that it was just skitter and squeak like a lot of insects fucking in a shoe box. I tried sitting on a chair in the middle of the room with lots of space all around me, but then I had to move so that there would be a wall at my back. I kept checking my watch and wondering at what hour it would get light again at this time of year. I got myself something to eat, but it was just like biting on chalk, and I had to spit it all down the toilet. After flushing it away, I put the toilet lid down and stacked a few heavy things on top so that nothing would be able to get in up the pipes.

They didn't even wait until midnight.

I'd have sworn I wouldn't sleep, but I was jerked awake out of a half doze when a handful of dirt and stones sprayed up against the window that looked out onto the street. I'd pulled the curtains shut, and I wasn't going to open them now, but I turned the lights off and carefully opened up the little gap at the top where the material came together. I held my breath as I craned to look out, but I couldn't see anything.

I went over to the chair and checked on my weapons by the light of the candle. I had every knife out of the kitchen, the biggest fixed to the end of a broom handle with several turns of insulating tape. I was wearing a knuckle-duster that I'd improvised out of two pairs of scissors, breaking off the blades and using more of the tape to bind the fingerguards together. I had cleaning solvent ready to throw on somebody, and a burning candle ready to light it. I had a spray cologne that would make a flamethrower. As I was running through a quick inventory, I heard a stone smack in the glass with a report like a pistol shot, and I eased myself back into the chair with my heart hammering almost as loudly.

I had a neat little arsenal, and I knew that it wasn't worth a damn.

Several minutes later I heard them at the door. At first I'd assumed that if Johnny were to come, then he'd be coming alone, but I could hear scuffling, which meant that there were others with him. Getting past the lock on the street door wouldn't have been a problem; I'd done it myself with a Visa card once.

First they tried the handle, softly. What did they think I'd do, leave it open?

Then the entire door started to creak as if it were being stretched inward by some heavy weight on the other side. I sat there in the darkness,

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my hands gripping the arms of my chair so hard that I couldn't even feel the pain of my scalded palm anymore. But the door was part of the original fabric of the house, and it was solid enough not to give, and after a while the creaking subsided.

Then began a light tapping, as of fingernails on one of the panels. And then a whisper. . . . Johnny Mays whispered my name.

"We're all here and waiting," he added.

And then I heard a woman's stifled giggle. And then a child whispered something, low and urgent. And then the fingernails again.

I wondered if the nails were hers. I wondered if she wore a dress with a black-red stain leaking up its front. It seemed that on the other side of the door, the tormentor and his victims joined together in their search for the unrecruited.

Something scuttled off down the passageway with a noise like a well-shod rat, and I heard Johnny whisper my name again and say, *"Hey, come on, come on out,"* but I think he was only trying to provide cover. A few seconds later I thought I heard the street door close.

I eased to my feet and moved silently across to the door. I listened; no more sound now, but the tension of someone listening back . . . and then more whispered words that I couldn't make out, even though I strained.

Then Johnny, so close to the door that I knew there could be only inches between us, said plaintively, *"Please, it's late. We're all cold. Don't make us wait. Nobody's going to hurt you."*

So I said, "I know you too well for that, Johnny," breaking my silence for the first time. It was useless to go on pretending. His answer was the sudden reinstatement of pressure against the door, only much stronger this time; I felt that I'd only have to touch its trembling surface to make it burst toward me like a bubble.

When the hinges began to tear themselves out of the frame, I ran to the window and threw the curtain aside with the idea of jumping; but a sound like a damp chamois gave me a belated warning, and I whipped them shut again after the briefest glimpse of the misshapen face that was sliding up the outside of the glass like a slug, a child's body with its flesh smashed to jelly and its bones to powder, its rotten-toothed grin flattened out to a hand's span or more. It must have spread itself against the side of the building and flowed upward like a snail in a jar.

The door came crashing in as I looked back, and I froze, the curtain

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all bunched up in my hand. The other three boys and the leaking woman stood there with the light of the hallway behind them, crowded up behind Johnny Mays and with eyes glowing like dots on a watch dial. I couldn't even reach my knives; they were closer to them than I was.

"We'd like you to come to a party," Johnny said pleasantly, and then I saw what he was carrying.

It wasn't fingernails that I'd heard scratching against the door.

Not fingernails at *all.*

Coming Soon

Next month: The feature story is "Steel Dogs" by Ray Aldridge, a powerful new novelet by one of our best new writers. Also, "Where Do We Go When We Sleep?" by Roger Robert Lovin.

Watch for our big October 40th Anniversary issue. Below is a partial table of contents:

J.G. Ballard, *War Fever*
Orson Scott Card, *Lost Boys*
Thomas M. Disch, *The Happy Turnip*
Frederik Pohl, *The Rocky Python Christmas Video Show*
Gene Wolfe, *The Friendship Light*
Lucius Shepard, *Bound for Glory*
Barry Malzberg, *O Thou Last and Greatest!*
Gregory Benford, *Mozart on Morphine*
Algis Budrys, *What Befell Mairiam*

Repeat: this is only a partial lineup. There will be more to come from many of the most distinguished writers in the field. The October issue will be on sale August 31. Or send us the coupon on page 160 to be sure of receiving a copy.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

LONG AGO AND FAR AWAY

SEVERAL MONTHS ago, I walked out at the close of a banquet and found it to be raining briskly. It was plain there would be no taxis, so two of the other banqueteers and I made our way to the nearest subway entrance, got onto a subway train and trundled northward.

As it happened, my stop came first. I bade my friends farewell and got off the train. The next day I found out what had happened to them after I got off.

Three youngsters walked up to where my friends were sitting, and towered over them in what seemed to them to be a threatening manner. My friends were well aware of the violence that sometimes takes place in the subway and they were naturally apprehensive.

One of the youths said something in a low voice and my friend, plucking up his courage, said, "I'm sorry, young man, I didn't hear you. Would you repeat it, please?"

Whereupon the young man, in a louder voice, said, "What I asked was: Was that Isaac Asimov that just got off the train?"

In a flash, the youngsters had changed from three threatening hoodlums into three concerned fans of culture with impeccable taste, and my friends answered cheerily that indeed it was, and all was wine and roses thereafter.

I don't know if those intelligent young men on the subway ever read my science essays, but if they do, this one is dedicated to them.

Last month I talked about the Doppler effect and the way in which it was used to show that the distant galaxies were all, without exception, receding from us, and that the farther off a galaxy was, the faster it was receding.

That gives our Galaxy a peculiar distinction, it would seem. It is the one from which all others recede, the farther the faster. That doesn't

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seem right, somehow. Why should our Galaxy, among all the billions, have that distinction?

Well, back in 1916, Albert Einstein (1879-1955) devised a set of "field equations" that described the characteristics of the Universe as a whole. Einstein assumed that the Universe as a whole was static and didn't perceptibly show any progressive change with time — and, after all, there wasn't anything different. That is, some objects in the Universe might be going in this direction and some in that, but all these changes would tend to cancel and the overall appearance of the Universe would remain the same.

Einstein's equations didn't quite demonstrate this, so Einstein arbitrarily added what he called a "cosmological constant," and gave it the value required to allow his equations to represent a static Universe. (He later called this his "greatest mistake.")

The next year, however, the Dutch astronomer Willem de Sitter (1872-1934) pointed out that the field equations, without the cosmological constant, represented an expanding Universe, one that was growing larger at a constant rate. That seemed purely theoretical, however, for there was at that time no indication that the Universe was indeed expanding.

However, once Hubble showed that the distant galaxies were all receding from us, that represented observational evidence that de Sitter had made a valuable point. The Universe *was* expanding, and all the galaxies (or clusters of galaxies) were moving away from each other. That was what made the galaxies all appear to be receding from us, and it did not require us to be living in a special Galaxy. If the Universe was expanding, then if we observed the galaxies from *any* galaxy, all the other galaxies would seem to be receding from each other, the farther the faster.

Einstein's field equations, in other words, describe the Universe as it was, and no cosmological constant was necessary.

If the Universe is expanding and we consider the future, it might well be that the Universe will continue to expand forever. There is, presumably, no limit to the space into which it can expand.

On the other hand, if we consider the past, we see that the Universe must have been smaller and smaller as we move farther into the past. That, in turn, means the past of the Universe, unlike the future, cannot last forever. At some time in the finite past, the Universe must have been so small that all its mass and energy were compressed into a small ball.

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This was first pointed out in 1927 by the Belgian astronomer Georges Edward Lemaitre (1894-1966). He called that small blob of mass the "cosmic egg." The cosmic egg apparently exploded to form the Universe as it now exists, and the Russian-American physicist George Gamow (1904-1968) called the explosion the Big Bang.

The Big Bang theory is now generally accepted by astronomers. There is some argument where the original cosmic egg came from, how it formed, how large it was, by what initial stages it developed into the Universe we now have, and so on. Such things are not the question of interest in this essay, however. Instead, let's ask, simply: *When* did the Big Bang take place? How long ago?

The way to get the answer is to determine how rapidly the Universe is expanding right now. Then, if the rate of expansion doesn't change with time, the moment of origin may be directly determined from that, and very simply, too.

Hubble's measurements, back in 1929, made it seem that the rate of recession was indeed constant, and that the Universe was expanding so rapidly that, looking back in time, the cosmic egg must have existed something like 2 billion years ago.

That this had to be wrong was indeed quite obvious, for geologists were certain that the Earth itself was older than that, and the Earth could scarcely be older than the Universe of which it is part. From the decay of radioactive substances in the Earth's crust, in the Moon, and the meteorites, we now know that the Earth, and the Solar system, generally, are 4.5 billion years old, so the Universe must be at least that old and possibly considerably older.

Fortunately, the yardstick used to determine the distance of the nearer galaxies, which, in turn, served as the basis for determining the distance of all farther galaxies, turned out to be a far more complex matter than had been supposed (see THE FLICKERING YARDSTICK, F & SF, March 1960). When the yardstick was revised, it was clear that the Universe was considerably larger than had been thought and must, therefore, have been expanding for a longer time. It followed that its age was correspondingly larger.

The time of the Big Bang must then have been at least 10 billion years in the past and very likely more. In fact, the most common figure now used is 15 billion years in the past.

If the Universe is billions of years old, then we should see objects in the sky that are billions of light-years away and, if so, we shall be seeing far into the past. After all, if a

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star is 10 million light-years away, then it takes 10 million years to reach us, and we see it as it was 10 million years ago.

Whatever is far away, in other words, is long ago, and the farther away it is, the longer ago it is. If we can see *very* distant objects, then we will be seeing the early days of the Universe.

After all, if we see something that is 15 billion light-years away, we will see it as it was 15 billion years ago, which would show it to us at the very beginning of the Universe.

Yet the farther an object is, the dimmer it is, and the more difficult it would be to make it out. Astronomers at their telescopes in 1960 could not have been very hopeful that we would have much chance of seeing the early days of the Universe.

By 1960, for instance, the most distant galaxies they could see were galaxies that, judging by their redshifts and the new yardsticks, were perhaps 800 million light-years away. That means we are seeing only 800 million years into the past, and if the Universe is 15 billion years old, we only see about 1/20 the way to the beginning.

How on Earth could they do better than that?

By 1960, however, astronomers had radio telescopes, which detected radio waves rather than light. There didn't seem to be any reason at first to suppose that radio waves would tell us more about the Universe than light waves would. For instance, the Sun emitted radio waves, but these could scarcely be as useful as light was in telling us about the heat, the chemical composition, and other characteristics of the Sun.

Moreover, whereas light came from a myriad of stars in this and other galaxies, the number of radio wave sources was far fewer. Distant stars, which delivered enough light to seem quite bright even to the unaided eyes, didn't deliver detectable amounts of radio waves. The only reason we detect radio waves from our Sun is not because it is an unusual star, but because it is so near to us.

There are, however, radio sources that seemed to originate from so restricted a portion of the sky that they were called "radio stars" in the old days. There was no necessary feeling that the radio stars were actual *stars*. They might originate in galaxies that were so distant they didn't take up very much apparent space in the sky. An entire galaxy might, after all, give off enough radio waves to be detected, even if individual stars didn't.

Some radio stars were *so* compact, however, that the thought

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arose that they might, after all, *be* stars. Among these very compact radio sources were several known as 3C48, 3C147, 3C196, 3C273, and 3C286. (The "3C" stood for "third Cambridge Catalogue of radio stars" that had been compiled by an English astronomer, Martin Ryle [1918-1984] and his colleagues.)

In 1960, the areas containing these compact radio sources were combed by the American astronomer Allan Rex Sandage (b. 1926), using the 200-inch Palomar telescope. In each case, a star did indeed seem to be the source of the radio waves, and they seemed undistinguished dim stars of our own Galaxy.

There were, however, some disturbing notes. Why should these few stars emit radio waves of detectable intensity when other nearer and brighter stars did not? Then, too, when these radio stars were examined very closely, faint nebulosities were associated with some of them. As for 3C273, the brightest of the bunch, there were signs of a tiny jet of matter emerging from it.

These radio stars, though they looked like stars, seemed to be something different. They were called "quasi-stellar radio sources," where "quasi-stellar" means "star resembling." As the term became more and more important to astronomers, it became too inconvenient a mouthful and was shortened to the first and last syllables of quasi-stellar —"quasar."

Clearly, the quasars were interesting to warrant investigation with the full battery of astronomic techniques, which meant that their spectra were needed. Getting spectra of dim objects is not easy, but the American astronomer Jesse Leonard Greenstein (b. 1909) and his Dutch-American colleague Maarten Schmidt (b. 1929) labored at the task and obtained the spectra.

When they did, it didn't help. They found the quasars had strange spectral lines that couldn't be identified. What's more, the spectral lines of one quasar were different from all the others, and all of them were unidentifiable — which at least added to the feeling of strangeness about the objects.

In 1963, Schmidt noted that of the six lines present in the spectrum of 3C273, four were spaced in such a way as to resemble a series of hydrogen lines — except that no such series ought to exist in the place in which they were found. What, though, if those lines were located elsewhere but were found where they were, only because they had been displaced toward the red end of the spectrum? If so, it had to be a large displacement, one that indicated a recession at a velocity of 40,000 kilometers per second, or

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well over an eighth the speed of light.

This seemed unbelievable, and yet if such a displacement existed, the other two lines could also be identified; one represented doubly-charged oxygen, and the other doubly-charged magnesium.

The quasars, it would seem, then, were not stars of our own galaxy at all. They were objects of which even the nearest was at least a billion light-years away. (They would not have been discovered except for radio telescopes, and their significance would not have been understood save for the red-shift, hence "the importance of pitch" that I discussed last month.)

Obviously they must be extremely bright to be made out even in our best telescopes at such a distance. They must, in fact, be a hundred times as luminous as a galaxy such as ours. Naturally, there must be something extremely unusual going on inside them to produce all that light and all those radio waves.

What's more, it was found by 1963 that quasars varied in brightness, sometimes surprisingly quickly, and the variation came in both the light and the radio waves. The variations were large and were noticeable over a period of a year or so.

This meant the quasars must be very small in size. Small variations might result from brightenings and dimmings in restricted regions of an object, but large variations must involve the object as a whole. If the object is involved as a whole, then some effect must make itself felt across the full width of the body within the time of variation. Since no effect can travel faster than light, a marked variation in the space of a year indicates that the quasar cannot be more than a light-year in width. Some quasars seem to be even smaller than that.

Such combinations of great luminosity and tiny volume are puzzling indeed.

The possible answer to this came from a study of galaxies in general by means of radio astronomy.

If we look at galaxies by ordinary light, they seem beautiful, but quiet. The centers are brighter than the outskirts because stars are more densely distributed in the centers than in the outskirts.

Radio astronomy shows us, however, that from the very core of many galaxies there is a steady outflow of huge amounts of energy. This is true, to some extent, even of our own Galaxy. We can't see the core of our Galaxy by the light it emits because dust clouds in the way block our vision. Radio waves go right through the clouds, however, and our radio telescopes tell

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us that in a very small volume right at the core, there is a veritable flood of radio waves.

Increasingly, astronomers are of the opinion that there are large black holes at the centers of many (and perhaps of *all*) galaxies, and that the energy is produced by the swallowing up of matter, even of entire stars, by the black holes at the center.

Where, for some reason, the central black hole is particularly massive and particularly active, then particularly large floods of radio waves emerge — much more than are produced by our own quiet and respectable galaxy. Where the black hole is raising the roof we have what is called an "active galaxy."

Naturally, the core of an active galaxy ought also to give off an extraordinarily high intensity of light, and such a core would gleam much more brightly than the rest of the galaxy.

Back in 1943, an American astronomer, Carl Seyfert, observed an odd galaxy with a very bright and very small nucleus. Other galaxies of the sort have been discovered since, and they are now termed "Seyfert galaxies." Some astronomers feel that these may represent as much as 1 percent of all galaxies.

It may be, then, that quasars are very large or very extreme Seyfert galaxies, ones that are so distant that only the incredibly bright center can be seen and that makes the whole object look like a star. Indeed, in recent photographs, the dim nebulosity around the quasars has shown up more clearly, and it seems very likely that we are dealing with bright Seyfert galaxies.

The quasars are all very far away. Not a single one is less than 1 billion light-years away. Generally, they are much farther. It is tempting to suppose that quasars are the products of the energetic youth of our Universe and that their prodigal expenditure of energy soon exhausts them. As the Universe grew older, more and more of the quasars dimmed and settled down, and fewer and fewer new ones were spawned, until in the last billion years there were none that existed, and perhaps none will exist in the future, either.

Quasars can be seen at very great distances, particularly with modern techniques for detection. However, there must be a limit beyond which they cannot be seen.

Suppose the Big Bang took place 15 billion years ago. There were probably stages in the youth of the Universe in which energy dominated space, and space, considering the thick mix of photons that was present, was not transparent. As the Universe expanded and cooled,

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the energy condensed into matter, space grew transparent, and, eventually the galaxies, including the quasars, were formed.

If we gaze through our telescopes, optical or radio or anything else, we would eventually penetrate to places so far away and, therefore, so long ago, as to see nothing but that opaque haze that marked the Universe before the stars and galaxies were formed. We would see that haze in every direction, and that would mark the "end of the Universe."

But beyond even the haze there must be the Big Bang itself, and we ought to detect the radiation from that. You might think it ought to be seen as an unbelievably brilliant burst of radiation, but it is so far away that the enormous red-shift puts it all into the radiowave region.

In 1949, Gamow suggested that the radiowave radiation from the Big Bang ought to be detectable everywhere in the sky at the same intensity. The American physicist Robert Henry Dicke (b. 1916) took up this notion and carried it further.

With Dicke's help, the German-American physicist Arno Allan Penzias (b. 1933) and the American radio astronomer Robert Woodrow Wilson (b. 1936) actually detected this radiowave background in the sky in 1964. This was the strongest indication yet that the Big Bang did indeed take place.

Given the cutoff region of the Big Bang plus the opaque fog of radiation around it, what are the farthest things we can see short of that limit?

In 1965, Maarten Schmidt discovered that the quasar 3C9 had so huge a red-shift that it must be 10.5 billion light-years away and receding from us at a velocity of 240,000 kilometers per second. This was 80 percent of the speed of light, and it didn't seem there was likely to be anything much farther away than that.

In 1973, the red-shift of a quasar, OQ172, was determined, and it was found to be 11.5 billion light-years away. (This means, by the way, that the Universe *can't* be only 10 billion years old, unless the red-shift is interpreted as signifying something other than distance according to the Hubble formula — and some astronomers suspect this might be so. They are, however, a small, if sometimes vocal, minority.)

Some 1500 or more quasars were discovered after 1973, and none clearly beat the OQ172 record.

Astronomers have now gotten into the habit of referring to red-shifts according to the percentage of the shift as compared to the original position of the line if the

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emitting object were at rest. The percentage is divided by a hundred, so that if a line is shifted by 100 percent, it has a red-shift of 1; if it is shifted by 200 percent, it has a red-shift of 2, and so on.

The red-shift of OQ172 is about 3, but then, in 1987, things broke loose. Making use of new techniques for scanning the sky, places near the south Galactic pole were chosen. These were as far away from the Milky Way as possible so that there is no dust obscuration and devices could penetrate into very deep space. In this way, 14 quasars were found with red-shifts greater than 3, and two had red shifts greater than 4. In fact, red-shifts as high as 4.43 are now known.

Astronomers don't know whether still higher red-shifts might not be found. If so, the astronomers are going to find themselves in an uncomfortable situation, for the best theories of galaxy formation indicate that they first formed at a time equivalent to a red-shift of 5. If we go beyond that, astronomers will have to work up new theories of galaxy formation.

In fact, they may be in trouble in any case, because of another far-off discovery not involving quasars. After all, quasars are very special kinds of galaxies and may not be representative of the whole. How far off can we see ordinary galaxies?

The problem there is that ordinary galaxies are considerably dimmer than quasars and are much harder to see. Nevertheless, there are new techniques for making out extremely dim objects, and we can see things that were hopelessly beyond our reach only a few years ago.

The American astronomer J. Anthony Tyson led a group that made use of a large radio telescope in Chile plus something called a "charge-coupled device" to record the images.

They chose twelve regions of the sky, each about 3 minutes of arc by 5 minutes of arc, so that each single region is about 1/200 the size of the full Moon, and all 12 together are 1/17 the size of the full Moon. These 12 portions of the sky were far away from the Milky Way, and they lacked any bright stars or galaxies. They seemed, essentially, empty space.

Looked at by the new techniques, however, within each one of these samples of "empty space," there turned up a thousand fuzzy objects. In all 12 samples there were about 25,000 objects.

These fuzzy objects are not point sources as stars would be, and they are not bright enough to be quasars. The feeling is that what was being seen were ordinary galaxies, or at

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least "primeval galaxies." It seems possible that since these primeval galaxies swarm in all 12 areas chosen, they swarm everywhere, and there may be 20 billion of them in the sky altogether.

Those that are present are at the "confusion limit." That is, if there were any more (or if we could see still dimmer ones), they would overlap and not be seen as individual objects at all.

The red-shifts of the brighter of these primeval galaxies range between 0.7 and 3, which puts them at distances of from 7 to 11.4 billion light-years. It may be that some have red-shifts of 4 or more and date back to a time only a billion years or so after the Big Bang.

Why are they packed together so tightly? Well, if we look in any direction at all for a distance of, say, 10 billion light-years, we're looking at a Universe that may have only 4 percent the volume of the present Universe. The galaxies in that early Universe would be separated on the average by only 1/25 the distance that separates them today, so naturally they're packed closely together.

As we look outward in different directions, we seem to be seeing a vast shell of primeval galaxies surrounding our Universe, but we're actually looking at the same small Universe from different angles.

Yet if distant primeval galaxies really exist — if they are not some incredible mistake in the instrumentation or the interpretation — they tell us that galaxies began to form only a billion years after the Big Bang and continued to form at a gradual rate for some 5 or 6 billion years.

Since current theories of the development of the early Universe tend to picture the galaxies as forming somewhat later, to begin with, and doing so in a great burst, it would seem that our view of the Universe must be changed. This could be very exciting, for we should end with the development of a much better and more satisfying picture of the Universe, and one which is closer to reality.

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George Alec Effinger's new story takes a look at what life and society on a generation ship might do to an adolescent who is born aboard the ship. Meet Brian Alvis, an expert on East Indian history who has not had a date in four years . . .

Irresistible

By George Alec Effinger

BRIAN ALVIS SPENT his accumulated pay on foolish things. For instance, his tiny dorm cubicle was decorated with plastic reproductions of ancient statuary. If he wanted to look at historical stone carvings, it would have been a lot cheaper — and more sensible — to buy a decent holo player and a rack of lamellae. It would have been the smart thing to do, because then he could have gotten his locker open. He couldn't now because the statues got in the way. And then he could have stowed his bunk flush against the bulkhead, in accordance with regulations, instead of angled across the narrow deck space. The statues were O.K. to look at, if you liked that sort of thing; but no one else on Double-R Deck could stand them. When Brian wanted to enjoy them, he wedged himself into the cubicle, lay down on the bunk, twisted himself into all kinds of crazy positions to see them all, and usually ended up with cramps in his neck muscles. He thought it was worth all the trouble, though, and ordinarily he never bothered anyone else, so his neighbors on Double-R

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Deck and his co-workers in the Cultural Retrieval section paid him little attention.

Brian's computer-generated advisor, whom he'd given a female personality and whom he called "Mom," tried to give him some helpful hints. "You spend so much time *alone*, Brian," she said sadly.

"I know," he said, looking at her image on the wallscreen in his workstation, which was bigger than his dorm cubicle.

"It's not good for you to be alone *all* the time."

Brian shrugged. "It won't be for long. It's just until we get to Wolf 359."

Mom looked upward, as if a computer-generated heaven existed with her on the screen. "Brian," she said patiently, "we're not going to get to Wolf 359 for another three *years*."

He muttered something.

"What was that?" demanded Mom.

"I just said that I have a lot of work to do, and I don't notice that I'm by myself all that much, and the three years will probably pass just like that."

"Brian, Brian, *Brian*," said Mom.

Brian touched ESC on his keypad, and Mom disappeared, replaced by pages of text from an art history file. He wanted to read about the originals of the statues he had in his dorm cubicle. They were temple carvings from Earth: erotic groupings and fierce deities and terrifying demons. The deities and demons made him nervous, but the erotic statues were even worse. Brian hoped that if he read enough and studied enough, they wouldn't make him feel so uncomfortable. Brian hadn't even noticed that the statues were erotic when he'd bought them — he was that ingenuous. He'd learned a few things since, of course, from Mom and from the historical sources. Nevertheless, he felt he still had a long way to go before he could call himself a blasé man of the world. Or whatever the equivalent might be aboard an interstellar survey ship.

No one could deny that Brian was an expert in his field, that no one aboard the ship was as well-read in East Indian history and culture as he. There was a division of opinion, however, concerning just how valuable Brian's knowledge would prove to be. When they arrived at the fourth planet in the Wolf 359 system, and made contact with the ominously reticent race of beings the previous crew had discovered there, the ship's biologists, xenologists, sociologists, and political scientists would have a vast flood of new data to collect and interpret. It was still unclear what

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contribution a specialist in a distant and unique Earth culture could make to the study of Planet D. A computer model had advised the mission's governing committee to educate an authority on Indian history, specifically suggesting Brian Alvis, who had been born aboard the ship and had never been nearer than four light-years to the subject of his studies. It wasn't clear if this education was for the future benefit of the inhabitants of Planet D, or primarily for Brian himself.

The journey would give Mom almost three more years to overcome Brian's reticence and awkwardness. The first step was to get him to discuss his sculptural repros without freezing up in embarrassment. Who could predict how Brian's discomfort might be interpreted by an alien race? Brian might unwittingly become the center of some interstellar incident, and his distress and shyness might have far-reaching implications. How Brian behaved could give definite, if inaccurate, signals to the aliens concerning human attitudes toward personal relationships, social relationships, government, even warfare. The aliens might well end up with bizarre ideas about what the human race thought about topics far afield from art and architecture. Three years sounded like a long time, but, given Brian's starting point, Mom had her work cut out for her.

"How long has it *been*, Brian?" she asked one morning.

"How long has what been?"

"Since your last date."

Brian blushed. "You mean just me and a girl?"

Mom let out a patient sigh. "Yes, just you and a girl. Monthly departmental briefings don't count, and neither do lifeboat drills."

Brian thought for a moment or two. "Maybe four years," he said at last. "I bumped into a girl from the fascist school on Y Deck; I'd met her once or twice before. We went to a metasense parlor."

"How old were you?" asked Mom.

"I was sixteen; she was fifteen. I thought I was in love."

"That's a start, I guess," said Mom. "What happened afterward?"

Brian looked down at his desk. "Nothing," he said. "She got up and left in the middle of the first sequence. I still don't know why. She never talked to me after that."

Mom's high-res shoulders slumped, and she shook her head sadly. "I wanted to hear about your *last* date, not your *first*."

Brian closed his eyes. "That *was* my last date. Also my first."

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"Why, Brian! Why are you so afraid of girls?"

He shrugged. "I like girls, Mom. It's just that they never give me a chance. If one ever took the effort to get to know me, I think she'd like me. I mean, I'm not such a bad guy. I think I'm warm and sensitive and all that. I just need a little time until my charm starts working."

"Your charm?"

Brian blushed. "Not that kind of charm, not like personal magnetism. I *wear* my charm. It's a special peacock bone. I wear it on my hand; it's supposed to make me irresistible."

Mom's animated jaw dropped. "Brian, Brian, *Brian*," she murmured helplessly.

"I know," he said quickly, "it sounds crazy. But the people who carved those statues knew all about making yourself captivating and ravishing to the opposite sex."

"What kind of success have you been having with your — what was it? Peacock bone?"

Brian took a deep breath. "Well, actually," he said in a low voice, "it hasn't been all that positive. I think you have to do all the things in the book together. If you skip part of it, or do some of it in the wrong order or something, it doesn't seem to work. I'm still learning."

"I suppose I *have* to ask: what book?"

"*The Kama Sutra*. The ancient Indian treatise on the art of love."

Mom smacked her computer-generated forehead with the heel of one hand. "Oh my God, Brian! The wooing of a maid isn't an art; it's a demanding *science*. You can expect good results only under proper laboratory conditions, after much trial and error. That's what *adolescence* is for, Brian. What were you *doing* during those years?"

He shrugged. "I was studying the mistakes I made during my childhood. I have most of those sorted out now, and I think I'm ready to formulate a general theory of my postinfantile behavior."

"But did you stop paying attention to what was happening in your life in the *present*? Weren't you even *aware* of your sexual awakening?"

Brian seemed hesitant to discuss the subject. "I have that part recorded on holo and KIM dot here somewhere. I'm planning to review and organize it next, after I finish up ages one through twelve."

Mom looked as exasperated as her preset parameters permitted. "We

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have so much ground to cover," she said with another sigh. "First, let me access this *Kama* whatever-it-is. Then I'll need to think about all this. I'm not going to give up on you so easily, Brian. I'm *determined* to salvage something out of the flaming wreck you've made of your life."

"I'm not a wreck," Brian protested. He did as Mom requested, though, and copied *The Kama Sutra* into her vast associative memory. Then he touched a key and watched as she vanished into her electronic quasi-life. He still had a lot of work to do.

LATER THAT afternoon his section head stopped by Brian's workstation. The supervisor was a man named Sokol, whose sour outlook on life was summed up by his feeling that if he were lucky, he'd be dead before the ship arrived at its destination. He had no sense of adventure and no curiosity about what they might find on Wolf 359's Planet D. His sole occupation was getting as much work as possible out of his subordinates. He admitted readily enough that the whole mission was a scientific milestone, but that his own department would be of doubtful use to the more lab-oriented researchers. He felt that the planners back on Earth had included Cultural Retrieval in the mission only for its entertainment value.

"Alvis," said Sokol, leaning in the doorway to the young man's workstation, "the department head asked me to explain just what the hell you're working on. I told him it had something to do with the tenth-century temples at Khajuraho. Isn't that right? Isn't that where those statues you've got copies of come from?"

"Yes, sir."

"The department head wanted to know what the purpose of your research is. That's a tougher one to answer, but I made up some story for him. I figured that if I didn't come up with something, they might bring this ship to a grinding halt and kick you off on some frozen planetoid. As far as I'm concerned, you're supercargo, Alvis, and I think the department head agrees."

"Yes, sir," said Alvis. "I'm grateful, sir, that you covered for me."

Sokol just waved the thanks aside. "Never mind that. I want you to tell me what you've been feeding into your advisor comp. I overheard your discussion with her. What was it you loaded into her main memory?"

"A book, sir. *The Kama Sutra*. Aphorisms on love, by a Hindu sage

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called Vatsyayana. It was written centuries before the building of Khajuraho."

"Uh-huh," said Sokol without enthusiasm. "A great classic of the mystic East, am I right? And you thought it might somehow come in handy on Planet D in dealing with an alien crowd of intelligent, semiconscious, crystalline monocots. All right, Alvis, carry on. Just remember, I'm keeping my eye on you. I'll be goddamned if I can figure how you're earning your keep on this ship. I'd be happy to put you in cold sleep and turn your work space over to someone else."

"Right, sir," said Alvis nervously. He watched Sokol turn and head off down the gangway.

The next day, Mom began Brian's course of study. She had read and analyzed the entire text of *The Kama Sutra*, and broken it down into a three-year program that would turn bashful, clumsy Brian Alvis into a man learned in the ways of love. Of course, that was operating on the premise that the long-dead Hindu author knew what the hell he was talking about. Mom still had her doubts.

"Brian," she said, "first we're going to take up the classic collection of sixty-four arts. That should occupy you for several months, but thereafter you'll need to practice each and every one of them until you're a well-rounded master. It's only after you have this foundation in the necessary intellectual attainments that we can begin discussing the actual intimate, physical aspects of lovemaking."

Brian nodded. He knew that he'd have to be patient.

Mom continued. "I've divided the sixty-four arts into eleven major categories. Your instruction will follow this rotation:

"Day one: Writing; drawing; riddles and puzzles; mimicry; chanting; reasoning and logic; tongue twisters; ciphers; languages and dialects; poetry; and arithmetical games."

"I don't see what that all has to do with making love," complained Brian.

Mom stared at him in exasperation. "Hey," she said, "This was all *your* idea, remember?"

"I know," said Brian, "but I thought we could sort of skip through all these early chapters and go right to, you know, how to inspire undying devotion and stuff."

Mom's pixeled lips pressed together tightly. "Brian, Brian, Brian," she

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said. "Day Two: Tattooing; coloring the teeth, hair, nails, and garments; sewing; and making disguises."

"Right," said Brian, disgruntled.

"Day Three: Singing, traditional Indian musical instruments, dancing, and playing on musical water bowls."

"Musical water bowls? Any girl in her right mind will think I'm a freak."

"Day Four: Making beds and arranging cushions in a luxurious manner, adorning religious idols with flowers, and making flower carriages."

Brian rubbed his forehead. "Do you know how much flowers *cost* on this ship?"

"Day Five: Stained glass and mosaics, gardening, stringing necklaces and garlands, perfumes, making yarn birds and artificial flowers.

"Day Six: Arms and warfare; cisterns, aqueducts, and reservoirs; architecture; chemistry; and mining."

Brian's eyebrows went up. "Cisterns? Cisterns are going to help me get girls?"

"They'll help you fill your musical water bowls," said Mom with a trace of a smile. "Day Seven: The proper use of jewels and adornments, gold and silver, and the appraisal of gems.

"Day Eight: Magic and sorcery, and the art of obtaining the property of others by the use of incantations."

"I don't even have room for my *own* stuff in my dorm cubicle," he said.

"With the right mantra," suggested Mom, "maybe you can take over another whole cubicle. Day Nine: Cooking, making lemonades and sherbets, and teaching birds to speak.

"Day Ten: Cockfighting, gambling, physical dexterity, youthful sports, and gymnastics."

"Is it too late to transfer from Cultural Retrieval to Maintenance Engineering?" asked Brian.

Mom gave him another smile. "Growing up is *never* easy, Brian," she said sympathetically. "You've avoided it until now, so you're going to have to cram it all into three years."

"I can tell you where I'd like to cram it all," he said.

"Now, Brian. We've come almost to the end —"

"Finally!"

"Finally, Day Eleven: Courtesy and etiquette, and the ability to judge people's character by appearances."

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"I'm never going to learn all that."

"It *does* sound like a lot, Brian, but I'll be here to help you every step of the way. After you've mastered these sixty-four arts—"

"Then I can go out and lose my virginity in peace," he said.

Mom chewed her lip. "Something like that," she said at last. "We're going to have to work on your attitude a little, too. So we'll begin tomorrow. Find a pad of drawing paper and sharpen two pencils. It's going to be a busy day."

Several weeks later Brian sat in the Double-R Deck Lounge with his only friend, David. Brian had tried to explain the huge assignment he'd been given by his mentor comp.

"I just don't understand the point of it all," said David.

Brian swallowed a little of his wine and explained about unmarried women. "Some of them are virgins," he said, "and some are courtesans."

"Courtesans?" said David. "I don't believe you said that."

"Soiled doves. Anyway, that's what the book says. Mom gave me a hard time about it, too, but when she went through all the data, she had to admit it was true."

"Mom knows only the data you enter for her," David pointed out. "She thinks it's true because you assigned *The Kama Sutra* the highest source-value of anything in her memory."

Brian shrugged. "I pretty much had to, David," he said. "East Indian culture is my field. If I deny the value of the original data, I might as well admit that my life's work is pointless."

"You're confusing things again, buddy. The ancient Indians had a rich culture, but even you have to admit their technology was primitive. *The Kama Sutra* presents a kind of bizarre picture of male-female relationships, Brian. It's not relevant outside its social context, and that has nothing in common with ours."

"You're wrong, David. Male-female relationships don't really change from one period to another. Not on the personal level. Mom understands that. That's why she agreed to tutor me. You're like most people: you think the book is just a sex manual. It's really concerned with how to make someone fall in love with you, the sixty-four arts everyone should know before he can hope to be a decent lover."

David drank down the last of his glass of beer. "I didn't know there *were* sixty-four arts. I get by with three: Going Out to Dinner; Inter-

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mediate Foreplay; and Delaying Climax by Computing Accumulated Vacation time."

"You ever ask yourself what kind of man is attractive to women?"

"I don't have to ask. I know. The steel-driving type I share my workstation with is. Anyplace I might meet a woman, there's always one of these bull-neck guys around to make me look bad."

Brian shook his head. "That's not what I mean. Listen, Mom taught me that certain types of men are incredibly attractive to women: men who are well versed in the arts of love, men who can tell interesting stories, men who have lived with women all their lives."

"You got this from *The Kama Sutra*?"

"Yeah."

"So how attractive are you?"

Brian shrugged. "Well, of course, I've never actually put it to the test—"

"You haven't? You, the great Love God?"

Brian gave his friend a dark look. "—but I do have a good grasp of theory. And Mom is making me learn a different anecdote or true adventure story by heart every week. She's drilling me on every one of the sixty-four subjects, even those she thinks are stupid or no longer pertinent. She always telling me I'm a fine specimen of a man, too. That's good for my morale, and confidence is half the battle."

"This is nutso, Brian."

"Women also find generous men very attractive."

David closed his eyes and shook his head. "Tell me about it," he said.

"But that's something I can cultivate for the occasion. My question, though, is still if I should try it on my own or use an aphrodisiac. I mean, if I use the crummy peacock bone, I'll never know if my success is because of my own glamor or the mojo."

David tilted his glass in the hope that a tiny bit of beer might still be left in it, but he was deeply disappointed. "You're mixing up your primitive cultures, Brian. You're mixing me up, and I think you may be a little mixed-up yourself. In a nice way, of course."

Brian looked exasperated. "You know what I mean," he said.

"Oh sure. Your peacock bone will get girls to talk to you. When I was a teenager, I relied on good grooming and spiked Cokes. The old ways are the best, Brian."

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Brian put a finger alongside his nose. "*The Kama Sutra* is the oldest way of all, David." He winked.

"I wish you luck, buddy," said David, standing up. "I really do. It's true that you're making a fool of yourself; and I feel like a fool, too, sitting here discussing it with you seriously. But let me know what happens. If the book helps you, you might be the vanguard of a new revolution, a retreat to low tech. The next thing you know, you'll be consecrating your first-born to the corn goddess or something."

Brian watched his friend walk away. He wished David could give him a little moral support, that's all. He didn't think he deserved such sarcasm.

MONTH AFTER month went by, and after a while Brian adjusted to his strange schooling. At first, much of it seemed just silly — the yarn parrots and the teeth-dyeing, for instance. After a while, though, it all made as much sense to him as anything else he'd ever done aboard the survey ship. Brian put aside his anthropological texts and concentrated on Mom's tutoring.

His graduation came almost exactly twelve months later. "You're conversant with most of the sixty-four arts," Mom told him proudly. "You're not a master of them all, but I don't believe that's necessary. And I think you've developed a proper respect for women that will work in your favor every bit as much as your peacock rib. Soon we'll study the practical application of this material. We'll cover the selection of an appropriate woman, the methods of attracting her, the varieties of embrace —"

"Mom," said Brian, "I've done all that reading on my own. I think I grasp it, at least in the abstract."

His mentor let out a deep breath. "I expected something of the sort," she said. "The impetuosity of youth. I'm glad I never had to go through all that."

"I owe you so much," he said gratefully.

"We still have two years," she reminded him, "and you still have far to go."

"Well, I think I've earned a little celebration."

She looked at him fondly. "All right," she said, "maybe you have."

Brian met his friend David at the lounge again that night. "Mom's taught me this stuff for a solid year now," he said. "I'm going to find out what it's all worth."

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"Those ancient Hindus thought women were a pushover for someone who could play musical water bowls?" asked David.

"Go ahead, scoff. I expect it."

"None of the arts are very exotic, if you know what I mean."

"Not to you, maybe," said Brian, holding up a hand. "But you demonstrate this kind of versatile personality, and virgins just can't help themselves."

A waiter brought David another bottle of beer, and he poured it slowly into his glass. "I prefer women to have a little experience, myself. I'm just not cut out to be an educator."

"You're wrong. Courtesans are not wholesome people. Only virgins can bring you real happiness. The book says so."

David grinned. "O.K., buddy, you just send all your courtesans over to me if you don't want them."

The lounge was bright and noisy. Across from the bar, some young men and women stood staring at a screen set up on the wall. "It ought to be easier to find a virgin among these people than in a group of older, jaded women," said Brian.

"Look casual," advised David. "Look like you know what you're doing."

Brian studied the people at the bar. The men seemed predatory and nervous, and the women looked cold and unfriendly. Brian was disappointed until he noticed that there were a few women who kept themselves apart, who were not as coarse and loud, and, therefore, not as popular. One woman in particular caught his attention. "What do you think of her?" he asked his friend.

"The blonde? With the white wine? She looks all right. If you like her, go take a shot."

She was younger than most of the others, and she seemed shy. She was wearing the uniform of the Gaff-Line Support section, but he didn't recognize the insignia on her tunic. Brian stood up and went to the bar. He didn't look at the blonde girl. He gazed down the bar the opposite way as if there were something of interest in that direction. After a little while the bartender came up to him. "You want another glass of wine?" he asked.

Brian looked down at his glass, still half-full. "No," he said.

"You could buy *me* a drink," said the girl.

Brian turned to look at her, certain that the smile of his face was not only crooked, but that it was toppling over and threatening to crash. "Sure," he said.

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"Mike, let me have one," said the girl. A woman next to her got up, and Brian sat on the stool. The blonde got her drink and set it beside her. She stared at the others at the bar for a few seconds, then suddenly looked up smiling into Brian's face. "What's a nice guy like you?" she asked.

"What?" said Brian, flustered.

"Nothing," she said.

"Oh. Do you come in here a lot?"

"A lot."

"It's a good place to meet people."

She said nothing, and Brian sat in confused silence. His blood was pounding in his ears. "She spoke before I addressed her," he thought. "That is a sure sign of her desire. Now I have to test her willingness."

He slipped his foot between her ankles and covered one of her feet, smearing her boots with black grime. She looked down and made a face, meanwhile gathering up her purse and gloves and buttoning her coat. "Come on," she said, "let's go."

"Oh my God," thought Brian, "this is it." When they passed David at the table, Brian said, "Take care of the tab, will you? I'll see you later."

"Right," said David. "You kids run along and have a good time."

There were few people in the gangway outside the lounge. "I suppose I ought to apologize," said Brian.

"Apologize? What for?" asked the young woman.

"Well, as I understand it, I'm supposed to spend the evening conversing with my friend. That was David; that's what we were doing in the lounge. But to be precise and accurate about it, he and I should really have waited in my dorm cubicle, decorating the place and perfuming it and all, and then I should have sent a messenger for you. When you arrived, David should have been there with me to welcome you, and then he and I should have entertained you with pleasant conversation. Of course, we left David inside. There won't be anybody but you and me when we get to my cubicle."

"*Your* cubicle? Look, I don't know about that. I usually like to go back to *my* dorm —"

"You'll find my cubicle very pleasant," said Brian. He was pleased with the sureness of his manner.

"Anyway, I have to get back in a little while." She jerked her thumb over her shoulder, back toward the lounge. "Unless you want me to spend the night."

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Spend the night! He knew now for certain that his studies hadn't been in vain: the young woman was certainly aroused. She lacked the timidity he had been taught to expect, however. Of course, *The Kama Sutra* had been written for another culture and another time. Mom said that he could expect to find variations in real-life situations. It could account for the woman's direct attitude — she was bewilderingly modern. Or else, Brian admitted, or else he had been wrong, and she was not a virgin.

They stopped at a viewport, and although there was nothing to see but blackness and stars as usual, Brian felt his own excitement increase. He put his arm around the young woman's shoulders. She didn't say anything, but neither did she try to pull away. "Do you think this is secluded enough?" he asked her.

"Secluded? Here in the gangway?"

Brian sighed. "It's as secluded as anywhere else we'll come to before we get to my cubicle."

"Why don't we just wait —"

Brian held the woman's shoulders and kissed her clumsily.

The woman tasted strange, stale from the cigarettes she had been smoking. She pressed herself against him, and he was aware of little else. "I hope you like my cubicle," he said. "Before I went out this evening, I was careful to fill it with silk flowers, glass mosaics, and games to make your visit more enjoyable."

The young woman said nothing.

When they got to his dorm cubicle, Brian opened the door. "Well," he said, "this is where I hang my hat."

"What?"

"Home." She walked quickly past him into the narrow room. The two of them looked at each other uneasily for a few minutes. "Do you like it?" asked Brian, indicating a yarn parrot on a bookshelf. "I made it myself." The young woman nodded. "My name is Brian, by the way. I'm sorry, I didn't catch yours."

"Suzy," she said. She was staring wide-eyed at the plastic statues.

"Those are my sculptural reproductions."

"So I see. I haven't run into very many of these on this ship."

"Ancient Indian art is my field," he said shyly.

"How can you sleep in here?" asked Suzy. "It would be creepy having all these people and monsters staring at you all the time."

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"I never thought of it like that. If they make you uncomfortable, I guess I could shove them out into the gangway."

Suzy laughed. "Don't bother," she said. "I'll get used to them, I guess." She took a closer look at a grimacing, bestial demon and shuddered.

"Would you care for something to drink, Suzy?"

"All right."

Brian squeezed by her and opened his small fridge. He began preparing the fruit drinks Mom had taught him, all the while sending Suzy his secret signals of love and desire. She did not seem to notice, but Brian interpreted this as proper maidenly behavior.

They drank the glasses of juice slowly. After a while Brian spoke up. "Would you like to make some flower garlands?" he asked.

"Maybe later," she said. She stood and stretched, arching her back and cupping her hands beneath her breasts.

Brian felt a thrill of excitement. "Are you tired?" he asked.

"Yes," said Suzy, "it's been a long evening."

Brian took the empty glasses and put them in his small sink. Suzy followed him. "Look—," she said.

"You know what?" Brian said. "I really like you. No really, I mean it: I really like you. I'd like to give you a gift, if you don't mind." Suzy said nothing. He handed her a small brown bag. She opened it and took out five cheesecloth bundles.

"Herbs," he said. "I have friends on the farm. I get special rates on all my herbs and flowers."

"Uh-huh."

"They're very healthful, the herbs. You can make teas out of them."

"You're very generous," she said. Her voice was chilly.

"That does it," Brian thought. "She must be a courtesan. She expects money."

"I'd like to give you something for being so nice to me, but I don't know what's correct, if you know what I mean." He was suddenly rattled. He realized that he might have insulted her. He never expected to meet a courtesan. Mom had glossed over them during the weeks of study. After analyzing the ancient text, she'd come to the conclusion that a virgin was most appropriate for Brian at his stage of imminent expertise.

"You could make me a present of some duty-time," said Suzy. "I hate Departmental Details."

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"But we're not even in the same section," said Brian.

Suzy shrugged. "It happens all the time. You mean you don't trade with the black market time-and-credit clearinghouses? You must not go out very much. You must spend all your time in here, staring at these naked statues." She gave him a wondering look.

"Well, how much duty-time do you mean? I suppose I could assume an hour or two."

She took a deep breath and let it out, glancing around the cubicle, appraising its contents and its occupant. "How about fifteen hours?"

"*Fifteen hours?*" Brian was shocked, but there was now no way to get out of the situation gracefully. Of course, this was all just a kind of commencement exercise, something to prove to Mom that he'd matured. In all probability, he would never have this experience again. Maybe it was good that he would make his first practical experiment with a skillful courtesan.

Suzy shook her head. "Ten hours, then. Hurry up and make up your mind."

"All right," he said at last.

"Unhook this, then, will you?"

Brian felt his mouth grow dry. He undid the hook at her collar, and watched while she zipped the tunic open. She dropped it to the deck, then slipped out of her boots and slacks. She wore nothing beneath her uniform. She was amused to see him staring at her. "I like you, too, Brian. Come on."

He thought, "Even a courtesan is supposed to act shy. How much of her willingness is due to my attractiveness, and how much to the ten hours of work I'm going to do for her? She settled for less than the fifteen. That should count for something."

She led him to his bunk. He undressed nervously and joined her in the bed. It was all moving along much faster than he had planned. He had assumed there would be at least a couple of hours of overture and prologue: singing, riddles and puzzles, cooking. But here he was in bed already, way ahead of schedule. He felt complimented. He promised himself that he'd make it good for her.

"Have you ever thought how strange it is," he said, staring up at the overhead. "I mean, here we are on a gigantic starship on its way to God only knows what we'll find, and we're carrying almost the whole

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of human culture in our databanks, and —"

"And you think all of us are supposed to be good little technicians in the meantime, right? Is this going to be a lecture on how I spend my free time? Because I won't stay here if you —"

Brian interrupted her again, the same way as before. He took her chin in his hands and tilted her face up, then kissed her gracelessly, his teeth striking hers. "Is she enjoying this?" he asked himself. If she weren't, *The Kama Sutra* warned that she'd shake her hands or kick him. Brian sat up in the bed. "Do you like the flowers?" he asked.

"Sure," said Suzy. "You must really like them, huh?"

"They're here just for you. The only reason I have them is to make you feel happy. They're too expensive to have around all the time."

Suzy sat up, letting the sheet fall. Brian stared at her until she shook her head, bemused. He touched her right breast with a cautious forefinger, trailing the fingertip down the slope. Suzy said nothing. Brian grasped the breast and lightly dug the nails of his other hand into the skin, leaving five marks grouped together near the nipple.

"What did you do that for?" asked Suzy, a little annoyed.

"It's called 'The Leap of the Hare.'"

"You're strange," she said, rolling over to reach her slacks. She lit a cigarette and sat back against the pillow.

"Mom always said that seeing the marks of the nails on a woman is about the most exciting thing a man could experience."

"Whatever turns you on, hon," she said. "Knock yourself out." She blew smoke toward the overhead.

"What I was saying before. Here we are in this gigantic spacecraft, right? And you and I are making love according to practices set down thousands of years ago, by people who could not possibly foresee that we'd be using those techniques on the way to meet a race of creatures —"

"What else can you do?" said Suzy, to shut him up.

"Here." Brian made a curved mark on the other breast. "This is a 'Peacock's Foot.' It's a hard one to do. A sign of great skill."

Suzy said nothing.

Brian waited until she finished her cigarette. He leaned toward her and kissed her again. "Our heads are aligned," he thought. "A straight kiss. She does not open her lips. A nominal kiss."

"We can play a game," he said. "We can see who can capture the lips

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of the other between his teeth. If you lose, you pretend to cry. If you win, you laugh and make a loud noise."

"I don't think so," said Suzy, turning away. "Maybe you should consider what happened to those people you study, the ones who taught you everything you know about sex. Think about where you are, and think about what happened to them. They spent all their nights with their peacock's feet and their leaping hares, and all that's left of what they were are those." She pointed to his plastic repro statues. "Most of us don't know a damn thing about ancient India, but we're the ones who are on our way to the stars."

"Well," said Brian defensively, "the statues are going to the stars with us."

Suzy laughed. "It wouldn't be hard to round up a few people to trundle the ugly things up to A Deck and boot them out an air lock."

Brian was outraged. "Look, Suzy," he said, "I like you a lot, but if you don't even respect—"

She laughed again. "Come on, lover," she said, "you didn't bring me here just to talk, did you?"

Brian caught his breath. "She has been excited enough," he thought. He put his arms around her and twined his legs about hers. "This," he said, "is the 'Embrace of the Mixture of Sesame Seed and Rice.'"

The young woman pretended boredom. "Always the same old thing," she said.

He hit her lightly between the breasts with the back of his hand. He did it again and again, at a rapidly quickening pace. Finally she knocked his hand away in exasperation. "She is ready," he thought.

"*Hin*," he said.

"What?"

"I said, *hin*."

"Oh."

"*Phat*."

"Look, come on already."

"That is the sound of bamboo being split."

"Jeez."

"*Phat*," he said, hitting her forehead with his fingers.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" she asked. "Can I go now?"

Brian was hurt and confused. "I thought you wanted to stay," he said.

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"My friends back at the lounge might worry," she said, staring at the bulkhead near the bed.

"Maybe she isn't a courtesan after all," he thought. "Maybe that's why she doesn't know what she's doing. I should be gentler."

"Let's wait awhile," he said. He drew his knees up, carefully pulling the sheet up to cover himself.

"I've really got to go," said Suzy.

Brian cooed like a pigeon. Suzy said nothing. He did a parrot, a bee, a quail. Suzy swung her legs over the edge of the bunk and stood up. Brian made the sound of a flamingo. Suzy put on her slacks and boots. "You want to get together again sometime?" she asked.

He was surprized and happy. "You'd like to?"

Suzy came to him, slipping into her tunic. She looked at Brian and smiled. "This peacock thing you did on my tit here is really something, you know that?"

"You really mean that?"

Suzy just blinked at him.

"Look," he said, "maybe it was a little awkward tonight. I admit that. May I see you tomorrow?"

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"Sure. Ten duty-hours, anytime you like; but we'll go to my place. No yarn parrots, no weird statues."

Brian put his arm around her waist and pulled her close. He kissed the material of her tunic. "I love you," he said.

Suzy said nothing.

When Brian reported his adventure to Mom the next day, she had a hard time finding the proper response. "I don't think you *understand*," she said at last. "You haven't spent the past year studying all these things to help you seduce *girls*."

"Of course I have!" said Brian. "What the hell else?"

"For the *mission*, Brian! For the *mission!* Remember Wolf 359? Remember Planet D?"

"What does that have to do with it?"

Mom's expression was sad, yet she couldn't stifle an occasional chuckle. "Every person aboard this ship is an *expert*, a specialist, very knowledgeable in one tiny area of human knowledge. The mission planners wanted to see if someone could present a broader sampling of our endeavors to the aliens."

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"The sixty-four arts? Is that what you're talking about? Is that what you've made me? A typical Earthling dilettante? What about the statues? What about my history studies and—"

"*Forget* all that," said Mom. "You've been given a more *important* job. The scientists won't get to meet the aliens until after *you've* spent some time with them. You've got to *charm* them, Brian. You've got to *seduce* them."

He thought about that for a moment, and it made him shudder. "So what am I, some kind of human geisha girl to the stars?"

"Very well put," said Mom. "You're going to be, well, sort of . . . a high-class, interspecies courtesan."

"Oh Mom!" cried Brian in anguish. He thought about it some more. "Then, in that case," he said, "why don't we forget all the rest of *The Kama Sutra*."

Mom's photonic eyebrows went up. "I thought you were anxious to master that part."

"Let's just wait until we both think I'm ready," said Brian. "I have my reputation to think of. There'll be plenty of time on the trip home."

Mom reached out, as if she could hug him from her place on the wallscreen. "You're a *good* boy, Brian," she said.

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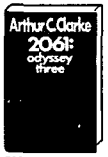

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